

1

The Creative Body: Source of a New Form

Art should be an affirmation of life, not an attempt to bring order ... but simply a way of waking up to the very life we are living, which is so excellent, once one gets one's mind and one's desire out of the way and lets it act of its accord.

— Jean Baudrillard

If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution.

— Emma Goldman

Two dancers move from separate areas of the dance floor to occupy the same space. Feet are bare, cotton sweatpants and a T-shirt fit loosely. One's elbow grazes the other's belly. The belly expands, prompting the elbow to straighten and the arm to thrust outward. This movement provokes another as both bodies roll on available surfaces — the back, a shoulder, a thigh — playing with resistance, pliancy, momentum, gravity, the pressure of flesh against flesh. At any moment, the dance may slow or speed up, reveal athletic prowess or tenderness. So begins a duet of Contact Improvisation, every dance a fresh combination of chance and openness to motion, a partnered improvisational dance that relies on bodies moving together with no set moves other than an awareness of their dynamic exchange of touch.

Begun in 1972, CI challenges easy definition. In addition to identifying it as experimental dance, practitioners have called it art-sport, folk dance, meditation, therapy, play, and a technique for choreography. All of these identities bear merit. However, when dancer Steve

Paxton founded the form, his intention was to explore the specific movements arising from the pairing of bodies in motion; he was investigating the perception and performance of dance. He recalls, “When we started, we didn’t know what we were making or where precisely it was going. We had to leave room for its organic development rather than where we wanted it to go.... CI is dance primarily between two people who remain in touch but dance independently, creating a third entity between them. This third entity is CI.”¹

This distinctive partnered dance relies exclusively on the abilities of the dancers to remain in touch with their own and another’s body improvisationally. Dancers find ways to pivot, roll, balance, and fall, following sensation and the momentum of their moving bodies, without a predetermined plan or musical accompaniment.

BACKGROUND

Paxton commonly uses the language of physics—words like momentum, gravity, chaos, and inertia—to describe CI’s movements. His choice of metaphors results from what he perceived in the ’70s as a gap in dance training. No language suitably explained what went on between couples. Additionally, dancers rarely discussed partnering. “Appalling barren” is how he referred to the absence of partnering analysis in modern dance and ballet. “Although you might have another twenty-five people in the room with you,” he explains, “you kept a certain distance from everybody so you wouldn’t be kicking them. You learned technique as an isolated person, and then you crossed the floor, perhaps even in groups, but always with distance.”² This omission became territory for investigation.

Paxton’s creative explorations were part of larger shifts. The 60s marked a time of great social and political change. Cultural ideals were shifting dramatically, with expanded rights for women and blacks. Eastern religions firmly landed on Western shores, and the New Age Movement was flourishing. Great artistic inquests earmarked this period. In dance and theater, folks like Deborah Hay, Robert Rauschenberg,

Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, and groups like the Grand Union, The Judson Church Dance Theatre, and The Wooster Group actively challenged expectations, blurring boundaries between audience and performer, art and life, one art discipline bleeding into another. With Happenings instigated by Allen Kaprow, events at North Carolina's Black Mountain College, Situationists, and a vital art scene in New York's Soho, the art world was rife with rule benders and form blenders, a virtual art laboratory.³ Dance training broadened to include somatic methods developed by people like F.M. Alexander and Moshe Feldenkrais. Paxton, who performed with Jose Limon, Merce Cunningham, The Judson Project, and Grand Union, among others, danced on fertile ground.

In January 1972, Paxton, then part of Grand Union, a collective of dance theater improvisers that included Barbara Dilley (then Lloyd), Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, and Nancy Peck (then Green), were invited for a three-week arts residency at Oberlin College in Ohio. Paxton had been exploring commonplace movements like walking and standing, a study that helped him break down the distinction between customary dance phrasing and pedestrian, or ordinary, movements. Choosing to work with men only, he used his visit to explore extremes of orientation and disorientation. The investigation resulted in "Magnesium," now considered the seminal dance for CI. In this work, eleven men repeatedly fling themselves at one another, colliding, sliding, and falling onto a cushioned mat. One of the students watching was Nancy Stark Smith, and she approached Paxton with her interest in working with him, should he decide to work with women on the material presented in "Magnesium." Trained in sports yet disheartened by its competitiveness, she was drawn to the physical rigor of "Magnesium." Several months later, Paxton invited colleagues as well as students from his guest residencies at Oberlin College, Bennington College, and University of Rochester, among them Smith, Curt Siddall, Nita Little, Mary Fulkerson, Danny Lepkoff, and Laura Chapman, to meet in New York City for a week of rehearsals followed by a week-long performance at the John Weber, a Soho art gallery. Says Paxton, "We worked at the Weber and showed our

progress — and lack of it — to the public because I had a strong feeling this was something that should be seen from the beginning, that it was going to progress.”⁴ The show marked the first time the dance was referred to as Contact Improvisation.

Reaction to the Weber showing and subsequent performances that summer was mixed and provided little indication that the dance would catch on to the degree it did. In part, this had to do with its presentation. No program announced names of dances, nor were there rows of chairs separating dancers from the audience. Without a traditional proscenium, audience members filtered in and out of the space, often en route to a number of Soho galleries. The dancers casually took turns standing on the sidelines and entering the dance space with no set cues other than an impulse. No one applauded; however, the structure of the performance didn’t encourage it either. About the reaction to the Weber showing and subsequent performances at colleges, museums, and dance studios, Paxton recalls, “People seemed intrigued to see a form of improvisation, a coherent process with a goal. Improvisation was a word with only a general definition at that point in dance, though in theater, processes had already been found and tried.”⁵

If the dance were to evolve beyond the abrasive and disjointed collisions in “Magnesium,” Paxton recognized he had to teach his partnered dance, with its Aikido rolls, falls, and format, and its moment-to-moment awareness, to fellow dancers. Many of New York’s downtown dancers as well as his students were eager participants, especially Smith, who viewed hour upon hour of video of practices and performances, helping Paxton to deepen his understanding and acquire a vocabulary for the dance. By 1975, the group ReUnion formed, with Paxton, Smith, Curt Siddall, and Nita Little (and later including Danny Lepkoff, Lisa Nelson, David Woodberry, and others), to perform and teach the dance annually on the West Coast; different configurations of dancers and ad hoc groups presented the work on the East Coast and elsewhere.

Aiming for a consistent but not closed form, Paxton described CI in a *Drama Review* article in 1975 as a work in process which contained six essential elements: attitude; sensing time; orientation to space; ori-

entation to partner; expanding peripheral vision; and muscular development, which includes centering, stretching, taking weight, and increasing joint action. He explains, "Each party of the duet freely improvises with an aim to working along the easiest pathways available to their mutually moving masses. These pathways are best perceived when the muscular tone is lightly stretched to extend the limbs.... Within this flexible framework, the shape, speed, orientation, and personal details of the relationship are left to the dancers who, however, hold to the ideal of active, reflexive, harmonic, spontaneous, mutual forms."⁶

Though CI was a new type of dancing in many regards, he considered it a composite of already existing forms such as wrestling, jitterbug, Aikido, gymnastics, and modern dance. Says Paxton, "I feel we have invented nothing; rather, specified a way of activity that is exclusive of the *aims* of other duet forms."⁷

As one of the more consistently visible CI teachers over the years, Smith has been asked repeatedly by numerous Contacters what it was like to be part of the dance since its beginning, a question accompanied with the mistaken assumption that the novelty and grandeur of the dance prompted alerts about its birth sent out to every corner of the dance world. Smith downplays the impact entirely and finds it amusing to consider that "CI could have been a piece that Steve Paxton made in 1972 which lasted two weeks, one week of rehearsal and one week of performance, and then he went on to his next idea.... All the dancers, too, went on to their next idea ... but the coherence as a form and a developing thing would have been lost. There were certain key decisions made along the way to try to protect it or encourage its growth as an entity rather than bar people from using it."⁸

PASSING THE DANCE

A key initial decision, not to retain exclusive claim to the dance, helped its spread. Paxton was less interested in maintaining control than he was in seeing where the form would go on its own. He con-

sidered copyrighting the dance, a concern which grew from hearing stories of injured dancers. Dancers were imitating the movements, throwing and catching, for instance, without learning how to work with the fundamentals of sensitivity, touch, and gravity. Going so far as to draft the papers for copyright, he wanted to protect the integrity of the dance and prevent it from being used recklessly. Ultimately he decided against trademarking the work, preferring ongoing dialog instead. The result: Without first getting permission from Paxton, those who learned the dance could perform it, incorporate aspects of it into their choreography, and teach it, even with variations, enabling dancers to tie it into their own movement experience. Even today, he refuses to claim the terrain mapped out by CI as his own. He doesn't command that only an elite few lead the Contact brigade. One needn't go through years of training at a Paxton Institute to learn the dance and obtain CI teaching accreditation. Instead, anyone who feels significantly skilled can teach or perform.

Within the first few years during the '70s, jams cropped up in major cities around North America — in Boston, Berkeley, San Francisco, Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto, and later in places like Putney, Vermont, Washington D.C., Minneapolis, Seattle, and Juneau, Alaska, and soon after in Denmark and England. Largely, teaching and performance opportunities dictated its spread. More and more college dance, physical education, and therapy departments with sympathetic and curious faculty grew interested in the form and offered invitations to the growing number of dancers earning their living from CI.

Over the years, there have been many performances of CI by long-time dancers and bold newcomers; however, CI occurs primarily through weekly informal gatherings called jams. Jams typically include a warm-up and dancers rotating in duets, trios, quartets and so forth, sometimes in a slightly more formal structure, a round robin, where alternating partners dance in the center of the room while others look on from the periphery and await their turn to dance. Jams, more participatory than performance driven, some with musical accompaniment, are peopled by anywhere from a handful to several dozen novice and highly skilled dancers. Large annual jams, such as Breitenbush in

Oregon, the East Coast Jam in West Virginia, and the European Contact Improvisation Teachers Exchange (ECITE, at a different location across Europe each year), attract as many as 150 participants from a number of countries and have been instrumental in exposing more and more people to the dance.

CI has proliferated due to these jams, classes offered privately and through universities, and the establishment of *Contact Quarterly*, a newsletter established by Smith in 1975, which expanded into a journal a few years later and continues as a biannual today. Founded to encourage dialog about CI and related practices, the journal also functions as an essential tool enabling CI practitioners to stay in touch with each other; at the end of each issue is a list of addresses and phone numbers, upcoming classes, jams, and improvisation festivals. Contacters traveling from one city to another can readily find the location and time of a jam. As a result, what began with a handful of practitioners blossomed into a worldwide phenomenon. Jams and classes occur in numerous cities throughout North America and abroad, in South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, with notably high populations of Contacters in Germany and Argentina.

Paxton's founding of CI pointed a finger at one's own body and another's, an act with profound personal and societal implications. Of utmost significance and the trait that sets it apart from all other dances is its emphasis on a moving yet continuous, improvisational touch, the contact point, an unmistakable space that joins two dancers together intimately. Of comparable importance, the dance is egalitarian, either partner free to lead or follow, its on-the-spot decisions challenging practitioners physically and psychologically.

Given that they were working within the dance field, it's no surprise that dance companies like Mirage, ReUnion, Mangrove, and Contraband, comfortable with experimentation, were some of the first to embrace CI. By virtue of their training and desire for distinction, dancers and choreographers typically venture into new aesthetic and kinesthetic experiences. As a testament to its staying power, however, subsequent generations of dancers, such as Arnie Zane and Bill T. Jones, Bebe Miller, Stephen Petronio, and David Dorfman, and more recently

Jayne Bernasconi and Brian Buck, integrate CI principles into their choreography, be it how they partner, work with balance and support, or take creative risks. CI has seeped into the vocabulary available to modern dance and shows no sign of disappearing anytime soon.

BEYOND THE DANCE FLOOR

Significantly, individuals outside professional dance embrace the work as well, partly because of Paxton's democratic reign. Experienced dancers move alongside newcomers, who move alongside computer analysts, who move alongside carpenters, who move alongside therapists. Whereas much dance is available primarily to slender, lithe bodies with innumerable hours of dance training, typically the sole harbingers of dance, CI practitioners welcome all onto the floor, including individuals with a range of body types — large, petite, differently-abled, aged. No one is discouraged from entering the dance.

CI has spun off into a multitude of directions — into areas other than dance, including meditation, play, therapy, recreation, exercise, sport, disability. Though its use continually gets adapted, it has not abandoned its original premise as a partnered movement form, a physical dialogue. Says Contact teacher Danny Lepkoff, "Contact Improvisation speaks for the belief that the realm of the organic body movement is limitless and rich in the possibilities of one's self, one's being."⁹

Paxton's lack of proprietorship extends also to an absence of artistic expectations, and the result has been CI's proliferation into areas he never conceived of initially. Consistent with the attitude of improvisation, he fully admits an openness to its progress from the beginning: "I have withheld that kind of thinking for this entire time. I want to see where *it* wants to go.... I think if I had a goal or if I projected a goal, I might inhibit it. So I want it to do what it does."¹⁰

For Contacters, the body is a vast resource, no mere concept safely quarantined by thought. Much more than cognitive play, CI demands visceral responses. When dancers spend innumerable hours pressed by

the weight of one another, bodies transform. Muscles awaken and enlarge, weight shifts, bones strengthen, posture shifts. As the body changes, so too does one's thinking, mind and body inextricably entwined.

QUESTIONS

- What is the difference between warming up and improvising?
- How does skill get in the way of improvising?
- When is your dance a vital movement exchange, and when are you repeating moves out of convenience or because you've witnessed them done by others?
- How does gravity influence motion and motion influence emotion?
- How do you enhance spatial and kinesthetic awareness?
- In what ways do your movements shift when you relax your jaw, your shoulders, or focus on your breath?
- Where does the dance begin? Where does it end?

EXERCISES

Warm-up with Breath

Sit in a comfortable position. Invite breath into your body. Focus attention on your lungs. Imagine their shape as they take in air and notice, too, the change to your ribs. How do your lungs release air? Slow and smooth, haltingly, or quickly? Note distinctive features of the billowing and contracting of each breath. What shape do they take? Does your belly, neck, or any other part of your body move?

Let your lungs enlarge further with air. Fill your entire rib cage with breath, enough to occupy your back completely. Notice any shift in temperature. Adjust your position as needed. If you get dizzy, return to normal breathing.

Send breath to the center of your pelvis. Widen your base for support.

Stretch your spine upward. Fill the entire cavity of your pelvis. Let breath emanate from that center. What is its natural motion? Does it percolate, swirl, ripple?

Send breath to areas distant from your lungs. Aim for your organs, bone marrow, limbs, face. See your body as spherical with breath rising outward from the center. Let the motion of breath move you. Start with small, incremental movements and gradually magnify them. See the motion as a solo dance. Embellish the expansions and contractions.

Notice how movements ignite awareness. Look for stretches, compression, relief, tension, heat, scents, images, hums. Let your body respond to itself. If something specific like a pain in your knee captures your attention, stick with it. Send breath there. Make it your dance partner. Respond to it in movement until something else comes into focus.

Whatever has been your tempo, alter it, slowing, speeding up, or alternating between the two. Let movement unfold from movement. Exaggerate the motion. Let motion in an arm travel to the spine or a leg. This is your personal current. Go along for the ride.

Variation: Begin by lying down. As you welcome more and more movement into your body, abandon this position for sitting up or traveling across the space.

Evolutionary Development

Begin on your side in a fetal position, eyes closed. Imagine yourself as a few-week-old embryo. You float as soft tissue in a permeating amniotic sea that periodically rocks and jostles you. Enjoy the gentle waves. Develop distinguishable legs, arms, and internal organs. Grow until you are ready to birth yourself. Let the delivery into a welcoming world be easy. Greet it with a momentous breath.

Roll onto your belly, arms folded by your side. Let your mouth and tongue be loose. Pucker your lips; listen for sounds. Open your eyes,

but only softly focus on light and shapes. Clench your fingers and toes; release them. Take time as an infant to discover the floor, light, shapes. Eventually attempt a crawl. Move from one developmental stage to the next. Attempt standing and then walking.

Recognize other “children” in the room with you. Interact with them, making simple sounds or going over to them. Wonder at what you encounter. Play, explore, feel fear, joy, or any other emotion. Indulge your curiosity. Be impulsive and mutable, your body soft and responsive. Allow contact with a fellow “child” and let a dance happen.

Variation: Partner only when you reach preadolescence or older.

Variation: Begin as an elder and devolve back into a youth or infant.

Supported Warm-up

Engage in your usual warm-up; however, situate yourself beside a partner. As you proceed with your process, make periodic contact with your partner. Graze his or her skin. Rest on a leg. Deepen a stretch using your partner’s resistance. Use your partner as a prop. Use the support his or her proximity provides to allow you to awaken to your warm-up habits. What typically gets neglected? What regularly receives attention? Repeatedly return to the present moment. What is new here? What is unique?

Variation: Both you and your partner warm-up together, using each other as props. Navigate the differences.