

[Dis]Connected:

Segmenting the Elements that Constitute Contact Improvisation as a Form of Communication

Erin Stahmer

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Thesis director: Professor L. Garafola
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¹ Steve Paxton, "Improvisation is...." *Contact Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1987): 15-19.

Introduction

Confused yet smiling eyes wander along a circle of standing bodies, surveying the eclectic mix of large, small, male, female, American, and Algerian attributes. “Tu parles français?”² is met with abashed shakes of the head as two distinct populations of dancers, American university students and an all-male Algerian company, intermingle. Although verbal instructions are given, first in French, then in English, true clarity of meaning is achieved only after bodies are propelled into motion. As pairs of dancers explore each exercise—one partner mirroring the path of the other partner’s hand through space, followed by one partner sliding through the negative space between the other partner’s limbs—a silent dialogue of non-verbal communication fills the room.

Joined together by dancer, choreographer, and teacher Stefanie Batten Bland, the informal workshop, or movement exchange, that took place at Salle Olympe de Gouges in Paris on June 8, 2011 thrust two groups of dancers from polarized cultural, political, and religious backgrounds into conversation through physical contact. Hervé Koubi’s dance troupe from Algeria was largely comprised of men of Muslim faith, while myself and other American students from Barnard College and SUNY-Purchase, the majority of whom were women, represented a mix of religious backgrounds united by the liberalism of our university environments. The two populations had the potential to be as incompatible as oil and water, and in the beginning of the workshop, the

² Translated into English, “Do you speak French?”

hesitation of both groups was palpable. It wasn't until after the workshop was over, during a discussion with Bland, that the underlying politics of the encounter were laid bare. In Muslim societies, cultural expectations dictate that women must wear burkas and practice the utmost conservatism when interacting with men in public;³ the mixed-gendered, contact-based movement that took place during our exchange would have been considered inappropriate behavior for Algerian women.⁴ On June 8, however, Hervé Koubi's men were faced with roughly twenty American women in skin-bearing shorts and tank tops who were ready to dive into exercises involving physical touch and close contact.

As the movement exchange progressed, the potentially debilitating cultural differences between the male and female dancers were subverted by Bland's carefully chosen diction. Each exercise that she described was summarized in simple, corporeal terms. To avoid the cultural and social implications that accompany the idea of physical touch, the words "contact improvisation" were never used or spoken throughout the entire two-hour period. Nevertheless, many of the "movement games," as Bland called them, were exercises directly lifted from the practice. As pairs of dancers rolled on the floor while maintaining a point of physical connection with their partner, as they experimented with the sharing and balancing of weight, the two leaders came to realize the necessity of communication that was embedded in the movement exchange. The following night, as part of the Onze Bouge dance festival in Paris, a repeat of this improvisational "conversation" was performed to demonstrate how movement facilitates understanding and exchange among people of different cultures and backgrounds.

³ A burka is a garment worn by many women of Muslim or Islamic faith that covers the entire body from head to toe and has eye slits to allow vision. Suad Joseph and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Gender Socialization," *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, Law, and Politics* (Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 203.

⁴ Stefanie Batten Bland, personal e-mail to the author, 1 December 2011.

While there is no single, standard definition of contact improvisation, a particularly illustrative description defines it as “an evolving system of movement based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, and inertia.”⁵ While contact improvisation can be performed in larger groups, it is most often practiced between two people who attempt to maintain a point of physical contact as they sense and react to shifts in their partner’s energy and weight. As bodies roll, slip, and slide along one another, non-verbal communication and the ability to respond fluidly to impulses of movement become paramount to individual volition or will. Furthermore, formal choreography and classical technique are largely incompatible with the practice of contact improvisation, which focuses instead on spontaneous generation of free-form movement. The form’s physical demands, which involve working in partnership with another moving, thinking body, have led some practitioners to argue in favor of the positive effects that result from engaging in contact improvisation, including but not limited to interdependence, shared vision, negotiation, mutual respect, and communication.⁶ These same virtues, however, can be interpreted as overly-idealized hopes for what the form can theoretically achieve. Can the practice of contact improvisation truly spur an individual to change his or her social conduct, beyond the dance environment in which contact improvisation occurs?

The implications of practicing contact improvisation have generated discussions and writings that date back to the form’s creation in 1972. Questions of sexuality, gender roles, democratic ideals, and communality have surrounded the practice and continue to elicit conversation among the global community of contact improvisers today. In this thesis, contact improvisation is analyzed in terms of its success as a facilitator of communication, focusing on the

⁵ David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith, *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas* (Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 2009), xiv.

⁶ Cheryl Pallant, *Contact Improvisation: An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 87.

exchange of values, thoughts, and ideas between improvisation partners. I will argue that the utopian claims of contact improvisation's ability to facilitate communication have not been adequately qualified in light of the form's global expansion. While physical aspects of the practice can and do promote communication across cultural barriers, this communication is also supplemented by the "elitism" or selectivity of the contact community, which has not shifted, even as the form has globalized. Furthermore, although authors and practitioners have claimed that the form's communicative virtues spill over into everyday life, it is my belief that this phenomenon is not universally experienced by today's global body of practitioners.

Literature and Methodology

In 1986, dancer, scholar, and writer Cynthia Novack completed a Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology at Columbia University that became one of the first substantial works on the subject of contact improvisation. Since then, her work has been published in book form as *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Here Novack analyzes how alternative American political ideals of the 1960s and early 1970s were embodied by the practice of contact improvisation. Through a combination of personal experience, movement observation, and historical analysis, she concludes that contact improvisation successfully created a social community of both dancers and non-dancers who desired a somewhat radical, democratic, and non-hierarchical environment in which to live during the 1970s. While Novack does not ignore the fact that these social circumstances were idealized in nature, her historical analysis promotes a significant correlation between the practice of contact improvisation and the embodiment of such values.

Since the publication of Novack's book in 1990, the number of written works about contact improvisation has grown, offering multiple perspectives on the form, its current social

implications, and historical accounts of the conditions in the 1970s that brought contact improvisation to fruition. Some authors such as Cheryl Pallant share Novack's belief that contact improvisation continues to facilitate egalitarian, cooperative, and communal exploration of movement, despite social changes since the 1970s. In her book *Contact Improvisation: An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form*, Pallant analyzes physical aspects of the form in order to support her belief in the utopian qualities that underlie and result from the practice of contact improvisation. Her chiefly positive outlook on the transferability of contact improvisation's qualities from practice to everyday life has not, however, remained unchallenged in contact improvisation literature.

In her book *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman argues that although contact improvisation has been widely posited as a means of achieving social and political freedom through "freedom" from formal dance conventions, such a view often ignores the unavoidable constraints that guide and limit improvisers.⁷ Goldman argues that one's artistic endeavors are never fully divorced from constraints such as race, gender, and time.⁸ Ignoring these restrictions not only results in a naïve and idealized portrayal of the positive effects that improvisation can elicit, but also deemphasizes the relationship between the physical constraints that improvisers learn to negotiate through the practice, and the unstable social or political landscape that they must negotiate outside of the dance studio.⁹ By focusing on one idealized trait of contact improvisation and by reevaluating its meaning and significance from a critical perspective, Goldman does not aim simply to challenge the claims of authors such as Novack and Pallant. Instead, she seeks to provide a rational view of what contact improvisation

⁷ Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5 and 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

has to offer its practitioners within the constraints of social reality—“a full-bodied critical engagement with the world, characterized by both flexibility and perpetual readiness.”¹⁰

Similar to Goldman’s critical reevaluation of the concept of “freedom,” this thesis reexamines the utopian claim of contact improvisation’s universal ability to facilitate communication between practitioners. While the social and political atmosphere in America has evidently changed since contact improvisation emerged in 1972, the emphasis that its creators placed on community resulted in the creation of *Contact Quarterly*, a journal that reveals how contact improvisation has evolved over the past thirty-seven years. In addition to *Contact Quarterly*, I utilize a combination of journal articles, contemporary literature, interviews, personal experience, and comparison to earlier texts, including those previously mentioned, in order to revisit the subject of communication in contact improvisation.

Although the subject has been touched on by various authors, a comprehensive work has yet to be written on whether the positive claims of heightened communication and awareness can be verified among today’s broad, globalized society of contact improvisers. By beginning with a critical evaluation of the specific movement qualities and aspects that perpetuate the supposed “communicative value” of contact improvisation, I provide a point of departure from which the form’s social following and global expansion can be discussed. My analysis contextualizes the communicative aspects of contact improvisation within the form’s historical trajectory—from its creation in New York in 1972, through the social and economic shifts of the 1980s, to the spread of the form outside the United States—in order to arrive at an informed conclusion regarding the transferability of contact improvisation’s values in contemporary society.

¹⁰ Goldman, 5.

Background

The historical circumstances that led to the creation of contact improvisation date back to the 1960s, when artists were radically challenging the precepts of modern dance. As the civil rights and antiwar movements grew, focus on individuality and experimentalism influenced the way that choreographers such as Merce Cunningham differentiated their work from the classic modern techniques of Martha Graham and José Limón.¹¹ Pioneering the post-modern dance movement, Cunningham's dances challenged traditional communication of emotions and ideas by stripping choreography of its narrative qualities and instead focusing on the execution of physical movement in space.¹² By ridding dance of symbolic meaning, Cunningham created the opportunity for artists such as Robert Dunn to push the boundaries of what could be considered "dance."¹³

Dunn began teaching a choreography class at the Merce Cunningham studio in 1960.¹⁴ His students, who would later become leaders of the Judson Group, experimented with raw movement of all types, ranging from pedestrian gestures to motionless bodies lying on the floor.¹⁵ In June 1962, Dunn and a group of his students, including Steve Paxton, Fred Herko, and Yvonne Rainer, put together what they called "A Concert in Dance" at Judson Church in New York.¹⁶ Their performance invited the public and fellow dancers to observe and contemplate alternative approaches to choreography, which embodied traits such as spontaneous group decision-making.¹⁷ Fittingly, the Judson Church itself represented a progressive attitude toward the social and political

¹¹ Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 25 and 42-43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25-28.

¹³ Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 398.

¹⁴ Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 1.

¹⁵ Reynolds and McCormick, 398.

¹⁶ Banes, 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

upheavals of the 1960s, including a push toward democratic, egalitarian communities, self-expression, and freedom based on individualism.¹⁸

By 1969, these social ideals came to be embodied in the dances of the Grand Union—a collective of Dunn-influenced dancers who utilized a group improvisatory structure to experiment with objectification of movement in a democratized performance space.¹⁹ As a member of this group, Steve Paxton continued to explore his personal interests in the realm of improvisatory structures, experimenting with different ways to elicit movement from groups of people who he taught while on tour with the Grand Union. Many of those students had no formal training in dance.²⁰ By placing people into partnerships in which they were required to work collaboratively, sharing weight and negotiating balance between a common point of physical touch, Paxton discovered that inhibitions could be usurped by cooperation. Further choreographic experimentation with disorientation, physical impact of body-on-body collision, and constant readjustment of balance in space resulted in what many consider to be the seminal piece of contact improvisation known as *Magnesium*.²¹ Out of this all-male performance at Oberlin College in 1972 was born the official form of contact improvisation, credited to Paxton as its creator.²²

Since contact improvisation's emergence in New York in the 1970s, the form has spread to every continent except Antarctica and has been applied and integrated into numerous forms of dance training. Contact improvisation was never copyrighted, and no formal certification program was ever created to ensure uniformity of instruction,²³ but it was this very assertion of trust and generosity among its creators that has allowed the form to be adapted and practiced by people of

¹⁸ Ann Cooper Albright and Ann Dils, eds., *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 406.

¹⁹ Reynolds and McCormick, 401-402 and 406.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 408.

²¹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 29.

²³ Nancy Stark Smith, "Harvest: One History of Contact Improvisation," *Contact Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2006): 49.

very different cultural, social, and artistic backgrounds. In light of the constantly shifting social and political circumstances that shape the experiences of the now global body of practitioners, it is worthwhile to reexamine the social virtues that have been historically promoted as integral components of the form. By doing so, it is possible to determine not only whether the idealized benefits of practicing contact improvisation are transferable through time and space, but also whether their influence reaches beyond the physicality of the practice to affect everyday human interactions.

Chapter 1: Evaluating the Physical Form—What Qualities or Aspects of Contact Improvisation Perpetuate the “Communicative Value” that its Practitioners and Authors Describe?

When Not Moving, Moves You—A Closer Look at Steve Paxton’s “Small Dance”

In early morning darkness, students at Oberlin College used to gather to take class with Steve Paxton,²⁴ yet this dance class was very different from most modern technique classes taught in the 1970s. In Paxton’s class, the goal was neither to leap across the room nor to engage in forceful contractions of the torso, but instead to be still—to not move. This practice, known as Paxton’s “Small Dance,” constitutes an important part of the preparatory phase before participants begin contact improvisation. In the Small Dance, practitioners stand upright, relaxing all muscles and tensions so that the body is held up by the skeleton without mental concentration or effort.²⁵ In this stillness, one ironically finds that there is movement—a subtle swaying back and forth as the body senses and reacts to micro-shifts in weight.²⁶ During the exercise, one becomes attuned to the ongoing feedback mechanisms and reflexes that the body naturally uses for stabilization.²⁷ This

²⁴ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 47-48.

²⁵ Elizabeth Zimmer, “The Small Dance,” *Contact Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1977): 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ Ann Woodhull, “The Small Dance, Physiology, and Improvisation,” *Contact Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1986): 16.

essentially sharpens individual perception of the persistent, internal communication between the brain, muscles, and sensory input from the external environment. When practitioners begin contact improvisation in pairs, the input each person receives from the external environment includes the shifts in his or her partner's energy and weight. Thus Paxton designed a preparatory exercise to facilitate clearer perception of non-verbal, physical signals that are both personal and interpersonal. In theory, Paxton's Small Dance is a crucial primer that facilitates internal understanding of one's own body as well as communication with a contact improvisation partner, but these aspects of contact improvisation training were more fully present in the 1970s than they are today, mainly due to changing social conditions.

In the political climate of the 1960s, the core values of Zen Buddhism—acceptance of everything that happens, yet also resistance to the status quo²⁸—were attractive to artists and dancers alike; amid civil rights protests, the cultivation of individuality allowed people to rebel while simultaneously seeking inner peace.²⁹ Born out of this Zen philosophy, Robert Dunn's teaching drew upon elements of Buddhism as well as Taoism, existentialism, and scientism.³⁰ If one considers the meaning of Chi—"life energy flow"³¹—it becomes clear that Paxton's training with Dunn influenced his creation of the Zen-like Small Dance, which focuses the mind to detect the energy that continuously flows through the body, even when standing "still." This peaceful state of being establishes a sense of center and the ability to initiate movement from one's core.³² The Zen ideal of finding an inner connection is in essence a communication with one's innermost self.

²⁸ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 55.

²⁹ Albright and Dils, 407.

³⁰ Banes, 3.

³¹ Koteen and Smith, 62.

³² *Ibid.*, 62

While these spiritual principles have not changed, contact improvisation's integration into formal dance techniques seems to have edged out most of this element. As a student of contact improvisation, I must admit that my first exposure to the "Zen" aspect of the practice or to Paxton's Small Dance came only after actively researching the subject. In contact improvisation classes that I have taken, my teachers have never explicitly instructed the practice of the Small Dance. Moreover, exercises that are used to focus attention on the relationship of the body to gravity and weight are not practiced for such extended, meditative periods as they were in the 1970s.³³ Contact improvisation teacher Colleen Thomas of Barnard College agrees that the Small Dance is a practice less used than it once was.³⁴ While some teachers continue to use the Small Dance to cultivate a focused state prior to partnering, others forgo this element of the practice for reasons that range from the time constraints of formal classes to personal teaching preferences. The elimination of this preparatory step would seem to have a negative impact on communication (both internal and interpersonal), but the form's continued recognition as a form of non-verbal "conversation" suggests that the importance of this element has been supplanted by a growing emphasis on other aspects of the form that prime the practice space for open exchange.

Removing "Dictatorship"—Does Contact Improvisation Create an Egalitarian Space for Communication?

Authors and practitioners of contact improvisation frequently refer to egalitarianism—the ideal state of equal power and contribution among individuals—as one of the form's critical social and political virtues. In traditional dance classes and company rehearsal settings, a teacher or choreographer typically dictates specific moves and instructions for students to follow. While students can ask questions regarding the choreography, communication is largely one-sided rather

³³ In Paxton's one-hour morning class at Oberlin College in 1972, the entire class was devoted to the Small Dance. See Smith, "Harvest: One History of Contact Improvisation," 47-48.

³⁴ Colleen Thomas, personal e-mail to the author, 7 November 2011.

than a collaborative process.³⁵ Paxton viewed the contrast between teacher-student and peer-to-peer learning as a “gap” in 1970s dance training, where technique was learned by the individual rather than in negotiation with another person’s body.³⁶ For Paxton, contact improvisation subverted the dictatorship in classical training by replacing the head instructor or choreographer with the dance itself.³⁷ In doing so, contact improvisation requires participants to communicate and to act together in order to spontaneously generate movement. However, even with this collaborative “requirement,” utopian equality among participants may not be as easily achieved as it has been made to seem.

In group practice of contact improvisation, it is not uncommon for a “natural hierarchy” to emerge based upon the practitioner’s skill. During the 1970s and 1980s, many practitioners became disconcerted by the “blanketing” effect of contact improvisation’s egalitarian ideal, which obscured the subtler hierarchies of skill that had begun to develop. Steve Paxton’s month-long workshop in 1979 called “Current Exchange,” which was for “serious” contact students, exemplifies the elitism that many felt had developed within the contact improvisation community.³⁸ This workshop differentiated between experienced contact practitioners and those who engaged with the form on a casual basis and thus began to divide the contact improvisation community. Even within the elitist group at Current Exchange, however, participants observed how hierarchies based on skill made it difficult to remain confident in one’s own ability without comparing oneself to others.³⁹ In reaction to Current Exchange, an event called “Country Jam” was held during the same year that was open to all students, whether beginner or advanced.⁴⁰ On a large scale, these two events—action and reaction—demonstrate contact improvisation’s potential

³⁵ Curtis L. Carter, “Improvisation in Dance,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000): 181.

³⁶ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁸ Elizabeth Zimmer, “Current Exchange,” *Contact Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1979): 36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰ Mark Pritchard, “Country Jam,” *Contact Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1979): 36.

to obstruct communication and the exchange of knowledge between its participants, but the driving force behind hierarchical delineation originates outside the dance world.

In many respects, the “natural hierarchies” that develop in contact improvisation are products of the societal valuation system in which we have been raised. Consider, for example, the American public education system, where students who excel on standardized tests are given the opportunity to pursue advanced courses that their peers may not have the opportunity to take.⁴¹ This privilege, based on the valuation of skill, is just one instance of how hierarchical rankings shape social structure. When one considers the commonality of this phenomenon, the development of hierarchies within the dance world becomes less surprising. As Cynthia Novack states, “What is particularly notable about the contact improvisation community is not that hierarchies existed but that many participants were so conscious of them and disturbed by them.”⁴² The existence of hierarchy is not exceptional in itself, but the creation of events such as Country Jam illuminates practitioners’ widespread desire to actively counteract its development in order to preserve one of the fundamental aspects of contact improvisation—open exchange between practitioners. Despite social changes since the 1970s and 1980s, practitioners and teachers still take action in myriad ways to counteract hierarchy.

Whether in classroom settings or at jams, differences in skill continue to threaten the egalitarianism of the practice. Heidi Henderson, a teacher of contact improvisation at Connecticut College, verifies this claim, noting that in her college courses, she rarely has students sit and observe their peers in order to prevent personal judgment based on comparison of skill levels.⁴³ Henderson focuses not on the existence of hierarchy, but instead on the steps that can be taken to

⁴¹ An example of this would be the delineation between “advanced” math and standard math courses that students are placed into in the first grade.

⁴² Cynthia Novack, “Egalitarianism and Hierarchy in Contact Improvisation,” *Contact Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1988): 37.

⁴³ Heidi Henderson, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer, 3 October 2011.

redirect a group's mentality toward communal contribution and participation, open to bodies of all types and abilities. If the environment in which contact improvisation is practiced does not successfully dissuade judgment on an individual and interpersonal level, barriers to communication can reemerge. Henderson has witnessed this phenomenon firsthand with her college students who begin to refuse active participation if they do not believe they are as good as the partner with whom they are paired.⁴⁴ So while the egalitarianism embedded in the structure of contact improvisation is, in theory, a successful facilitator of communication and participation, one must also recognize that this democratization of space is in no way guaranteed or supplied without effort on the part of all parties to maintain it. However, other aspects of the form, such as the physics which underpin a practitioner's movement, seem to be more fully integrated into the practice's framework.

Built-In Values—It's Hard to Cheat Physics

In contact improvisation, gravity plays a decisive role in how a practitioner will react to his or her partner's impulses of energy. In *Fall After Newton*, a documentary film that captures the first eleven years of contact improvisation's development, Steve Paxton notes that contact improvisation allows participants to experience gravity in a way that Sir Isaac Newton ignored—it allows participants to understand “what it feels like to be the apple.”⁴⁵ In *Fall After Newton*, video clips expose the simultaneous thrill and danger that contact improvisation brings its practitioners through momentum, centrifugal force, and gravity. For example, in a duet between two of contact's original practitioners—Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton—Smith drapes herself over one of Paxton's shoulders as he repeatedly turns underneath himself. Although Smith looks as if

⁴⁴ Henderson, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer.

⁴⁵ In 1666, Isaac Newton watched an apple fall from a tree, inspiring his conceptualization of gravity. *Fall After Newton*, filmed by Steve Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Lisa Kraus, Steve Paxton, Cathy Weis, Jim Meyer, Jules Backus, edited by Steve Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, narration by Steve Paxton, 23 min. Videoda, 1987, videocassette.

she might fall off at any moment, she remains safe, her weight perfectly balanced on the fulcrum that Paxton's shoulder has become.⁴⁶

Throughout the video, slow motion analyses of clips emphasize the delicate relationship between gravity and communication that must be cultivated in order to minimize danger. At one point, Smith partners Curt Siddall, another early practitioner of contact improvisation. As she flips from a handstand into a sitting position over Siddall's shoulder, Smith suddenly realizes that her momentum has carried her too far forward, beyond Siddall's shoulder and toward the floor. Nevertheless, instead of panicking, Smith extends both of her legs and uses the support of Siddall's back to slide toward the ground. In Paxton's narration of this clip, he describes the physical aspects of Smith's improvisation that allow her to descend safely: "The support needed from the unconscious, reflexive parts of the brain is more present when the conscious mind is not afraid. The calmness of standing is extended into [her] fall."⁴⁷ In his statement, Paxton refers not only to the unavoidable gravitational forces that act upon Smith's body, but also to the calm mental state that practitioners must embody. This demonstration underscores how physics can be tempered by communication between contact improvisation partners; momentum and inertia put Smith in a precarious situation, but sensing, adapting, and communicating with her partner carry her to safety.

In the 1970s, some practitioners danced contact improvisation "with abandon"—with a wild spirit and carelessness that jeopardized the safety of those who participated; when reports of injuries started to occur, it became evident that people were straying from the structure that underpins the practice.⁴⁸ Physical harmonization with one's partner—understanding and sensing when he or she is falling or needs support—is required in order to be able to dance freely, yet

⁴⁶ *Fall After Newton*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Smith, "Harvest: One History of Contact Improvisation," 50.

safely.⁴⁹ From the examples shown in *Fall After Newton*, it is made clear that communication is not just an “idealized” result of the form—it is an integral component, without which the dance cannot continue. As Smith notes in an interview, a contact improvisation partnership must be mutually adaptive rather than a competition for power.⁵⁰ Individuals can assume an active or passive role—initiating movement versus listening and responding to a partner’s energetic impulses—but the communicative power of contact improvisation lies in the fact that both individuals must take turns assuming those roles in order for the partnership to succeed.⁵¹ Practitioners have to communicate non-verbally to share a common center of balance and to experiment with the give-and-take of weight. In this sense, communication becomes a prerequisite for the safe practice of contact improvisation. As such, it seems that the utopian ideals of cooperation and mutual understanding truly are underpinned by the functionality of moving bodies that are subject to gravity and momentum, but it is also worthwhile to consider whether Paxton’s emphasis on the physics and physicality of the form alludes to underlying problems other than safety.

For Paxton, focusing on the body’s biological reflexes to physical contact was a way to overcome culturally-imposed ideas that can create barriers to communication.⁵² Placing emphasis on the physics of the form was a way to objectify bodies so that interaction was a simple language of reflexes responding to reflexes.⁵³ In Robert Turner’s article “Steve Paxton’s ‘Interior Techniques’: Contact Improvisation and Political Power,” he notes that practitioners in the 1970s did not feel the need to address conflicting issues of culture, for “If one could simply supersede a

⁴⁹ Koteen and Smith, 5.

⁵⁰ Nancy Stark Smith, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer, 2 October 2011.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² “Culturally-imposed ideas” include sexual and cultural implications of touch. Paxton warned practitioners to not involve themselves in a “gland game,” where focus on sexuality can inhibit communication and can pose a threat to safety. Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 82 and 164-165.

⁵³ Robert Turner, “Steve Paxton’s ‘Interior Techniques’: Contact Improvisation and Political Power,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (2010): 123-135.

docile consciousness through ‘bodily experience,’ then why bother with specific sensations relating to ‘culture’—especially if one’s experience of ‘culture’ and authority had been painful?”⁵⁴ During the racial and political turmoil of the early 1970s, this escapism from confrontations related to cultural difference was unsurprisingly attractive to many practitioners. However, the idea of a “natural body,” unhindered by race, class, and gender has also been criticized for ignoring aspects of identity and individuality that cannot be “left at the door” when a practitioner enters a jam or class.⁵⁵ Furthermore, with the globalization of contact improvisation, the ability to “suspend” cultural differences (e.g. race, religion, class) and the way in which society (e.g. political systems and institutions) shapes interpersonal interactions has become an issue that improvisers can no longer ignore.⁵⁶ A closer examination of physical touch—one of the most basic and critical components of contact improvisation—explains how focusing on physicality does not necessarily eliminate social and cultural difference.

A “Touch” Too Much?

Physical touch can be considered the Rosetta Stone of contact improvisation. It is the key element that differentiates contact improvisation from other forms of movement practice, and is in essence, the source of all information that a contact improvisation practitioner needs in order to move in relation to a partner. During skin-to-skin contact, sensory receptors detect external stimuli that the brain then interprets, allowing the body to react. Strong contact of a shoulder against a stomach, for example, can initiate several different reactions, from a shoulder lift to a roll over the back, all depending on how that touch is interpreted. In a nonverbal form of movement, touch becomes one’s insight to and initiator of interpersonal communication, providing our brains with information on the forces of gravity, momentum, and inertia as experienced by a partner. It is this

⁵⁴ Turner, 131.

⁵⁵ Dana Prince, “Leave Your Identity at the Door?: Politics of Difference and Contact Improvisation,” *Contact Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2003): 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

vital information that must be processed and understood to ensure safety when engaging in the lifts, slips, rolls, and dives that are woven in and out of a contact improvisation session. This objectification of touch, however, does not pay due respect to the social, cultural, and emotional implications that touch can convey.

Nancy Stark Smith notes that, “[Contact improvisation] does offer a relatively neutral vehicle for exploring the exchange of movement and impulses through the touch—not particularly clinical, not necessarily social, but human and physical—but even so, we’re never completely free of our cultural assumptions and patterns.”⁵⁷ Her statement alludes to several important questions. How does one reconcile the different cultural implications of a hand softly placed on someone’s shoulder? Does this touch signify sorrow, sympathy, or sensuality? Interpretation of touch plays a decisive role in the success of contact improvisers’ ability to communicate in a group setting, particularly in situations where individuals may be complete strangers and may speak different languages. Practitioners thus face the challenge of ensuring that touch acts as a positive facilitator of communication, while simultaneously preventing sexual or romantic signals that have the potential to generate opposite effects of unease and blurred definition of purpose.

A contact improvisation jam provides an example of a social situation in which the communicative benefits of touch risk becoming sexually charged for the worse. At a jam, a group of practitioners participate in a free-form session of partnering that may last for several hours. Although the public nature of jams inherently provides a social safety net, this has not eliminated the risk of inappropriate behavior. In an article published in *Contact Quarterly* in the Winter/Spring issue of 1996, Joanna Cashman draws upon personal experiences at jams to discuss the importance of boundaries in contact improvisation. Cashman distinguishes between two types of intimacy—physical intimacy and sexual intimacy—suggesting that there exists an unspoken

⁵⁷ Koteen and Smith, 8.

agreement that the latter of these should not be pursued during contact improvisation.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, not all individuals will respect this personal boundary, and as Cashman admits, she has known many women who have stopped practicing contact improvisation due to uncomfortable experiences in which men seized the opportunity to touch and explore women's bodies with sexual intentions.⁵⁹

Touch can thus be considered a double-edged sword. Practitioners must simultaneously stand firmly by their own boundaries while respecting and responding to the boundaries of others. Otherwise, the positive, communicative effects of touch (e.g. understanding the direction in which a partner's weight is headed, or sensing a partner's hesitancy to be lifted) may not prevail. Trust is reciprocal; you must trust that your partner will respect personal limits and will listen and respond to your shifts in weight just as you agree to do for your partner. Thus the positive communicative effects of touch are conditional upon several factors. Even within a group setting where the public nature of the exchange imposes constraints, individuals must ask themselves whether they have the capacity and ability to focus on the objectified physics of touch during contact improvisation. This is a question that has become increasingly important as people of various cultures, backgrounds, and therefore expectations, enter into the dance.

Returning to the cultural encounter that introduced this essay, the movement exchange between Hervé Koubi's all-male Algerian dance troupe and female university students from America demonstrates that even though touch can never be truly neutral or free from cultural implications, touch in contact improvisation need not always be sexually charged. Despite the fact that two distinct male and female populations were brought together in close contact, the focus did, in fact, remain on the physical exercises and tasks at hand. Even though I and the other female

⁵⁸ Joanna Cashman, "Personal Boundaries in Contact: The Complexities of Shadow and Light," *Contact Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1996): 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

American students were dressed in a more revealing manner than most women dress in Algeria, reinforcement of the educational purpose of the encounter ensured a respectful and enlightening cultural exchange, mediated by physical movement. This is merely one example of how contact improvisation can facilitate the positive effects of touch. While the threat of abusing physical touch may never be fully absent, this threat can be significantly reduced.

The physical traits of contact improvisation—sensing, egalitarianism, physics, and touch—are thus important factors that determine the level of communication between participants. While my personal experience with the American-Algerian exchange shows how proper conditions can evoke contact improvisation’s utopian ideals (e.g. negotiation, shared vision, and respect), experiences such as those recounted by Cashman reveal that these traits are not automatic or guaranteed. In order to better understand how these virtues take shape in contemporary society, one must come to a clearer understanding of who practices contact improvisation and who these communicative virtues truly benefit.

Chapter 2: Contact Improvisation’s Social Following—A Closer Look at Who Practices Contact Improvisation and the True Extent of its Global Reach

Contact Improvisation in the Western World—A Question of Diversity

Despite contact improvisation’s continued practice, the form has undergone significant shifts in usage since its creation in 1972. When contact improvisation was first conceptualized, it was a fairly insular form of art, practiced by avant-garde artists in New York’s downtown dance scene. Paxton himself admits, “We deliberately performed...in a really public situation, because we all felt that it was the beginning of something, and that it would be interesting—although I don’t really think anybody else found it as interesting as we did.”⁶⁰ During what Novack refers to as the

⁶⁰ Zimmer, “Current Exchange,” 39.

“‘touchy-feel, group encounter’ era” of the 1970s, the form gained several hundred activists who participated in jams as well as students who took contact improvisation classes, but social and economic changes during the 1980s divided what was once considered both an art and social form into two parts: a recreational social activity and a supplement to technical training and choreography.⁶¹ By 1983, the contact communities in which practice, performance, and communal living were all part of a “way of life” were no longer as easy to form and proved to be financially unsustainable amidst economic downturn.⁶² As a result, the practice of contact improvisation began to shift to a body of professional dancers who primarily used the form as a way of expanding their modern dance vocabularies.⁶³ It was this shift that significantly influenced the spheres in which contact improvisation is practiced today.

In contemporary society, contact improvisation continues to be utilized in training and choreography, but it has also found a particular stronghold in colleges and universities where it is heralded as facilitator of communication, understanding, and cooperation among students. According to Daniel Lepkoff, an early practitioner, contact improvisation holds particular value and appeal to college-age people because they are in a phase of transition, “coming to grips with the image and reality of themselves as adults.”⁶⁴ In college courses where an equal number of male and female students is not guaranteed, contact improvisation can bring students into same-gendered partnerships, inverting the traditional male-female partnering roles in ballet and other dance forms. In a collegial learning environment that is moderated by an instructor, these partnerships provide students with a safe opportunity to “break from usual societal expectations, dismantling prevalent hierarchical disparities based on gender, sexual preference, race, class, or

⁶¹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 87 and 166.

⁶² Albright and Dils, 411.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁶⁴ Daniel Lepkoff, “The Educational Value of Contact Improvisation,” *Contact Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1980): 42. Lepkoff worked with Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith during the 1970s and beyond.

ability” so that partnerships are formed based on mutual respect rather than “unwelcome social debris.”⁶⁵ In this sense, the practice of contact improvisation is particularly effective for college students as it provides emotional support in a non-judgmental setting, promoting strength of presence and the cultivation of personal power through “control over one’s perceptual reality.”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, contact improvisation’s success and widespread practice throughout American universities is not indicative of its expansion throughout the general American population. Gaps exist between those who are willing and unwilling to practice contact improvisation based on the intimacy of its physical demands.⁶⁷ To a certain extent, one must acknowledge that contact improvisation appeals to a specific group of dancers and people who are open to movement experimentation and touch. The founders of contact improvisation, including Nancy Stark Smith, are aware of this reality, and she concedes that contact improvisation is “not for everybody.”⁶⁸ However, this exception, based on opposition to the form’s physical demands, does not fully acknowledge the racial and economic divisions that characterized the contact improvisation community in 1972.

When Paxton first created contact improvisation in the 1970s, the majority of its followers were “young, college-educated, white, middle-class Americans living in transient, communal settings.”⁶⁹ This apparent domination of one ethnic group and social class led to important questions regarding the form’s potential to facilitate communication and exchange among people of different backgrounds. At a conference called FOCUS 8/77 that took place on August 20, 1977, practitioners voiced their concerns over the “politics of contact.”⁷⁰ Some practitioners suggested that the reason for the lack of diversity among practitioners was because contact improvisation

⁶⁵ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 79-80.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁷ Smith, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 10.

⁷⁰ Byron Brown, “The Politics of Contact,” *Contact Quarterly* 3, nos. 3/4 (1978): 4.

filled a spiritual “need” for white, middle-class Americans to get in touch with their bodies, whereas other racial and ethnic groups found this connection through spiritual practices embedded in their culture (e.g. Buddhism).⁷¹ Others suggested that the form itself is elitist—a reflection of social, economic, and educational divisions within American society during the 1970s.⁷² While the conference attendees came to no single conclusion that could explain the lack of diversity among practitioners, what is important to note is that these perceived stereotypes seem to have persisted over the past four decades, at least in terms of economic status and educational background.

A closer examination of the shifts in contact improvisation’s usage suggests that the contact community may still appeal to a relatively insular group of middle-class, educated people.

Although jams such as those offered at the Children’s Aid Society every Monday evening in New York continue to be offered in cities across the United States, economic and social changes since the 1960s have transformed what was once known as a “contact improvisation movement” into a practice largely communicated through more formal settings such as classes and workshops.⁷³

While most jams are free to attend, contact improvisation classes and courses are only accessible to those who are able and willing to pay the instructional fee.⁷⁴ Furthermore, although scholarship programs provide some economically disadvantaged students with the opportunity to pursue higher education, the stronghold that contact improvisation has found in colleges and universities suggests that a significant portion of today’s contact improvisation population is educated and middle-class. Despite increases in the racial diversity of the United States’ college population since the 1970s,

⁷¹ Brown, 4.

⁷² Ibid., 6.

⁷³ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 213.

⁷⁴ Class fees vary. At colleges where contact improvisation courses are offered, students are given the opportunity to practice contact as part of their tuition fee, which ranges in the thousands of dollars. Classes at dance studios such as the one taught by Japanese contact improviser Kayoko Nakajima every Friday near Union Square, New York cost \$18 per class, whereas the contact class held by Movement Research at Eden’s Expressway, New York costs \$13 per class. See “Ongoing Jams/Classes—local classes and jams—“regularly scheduled dancing.” ContactImprov.net, <http://www.contactimprov.net/jams/list/United_States/New_York> (5 December 2011).

contact teacher Dana Prince at Oberlin College notes the continued lack of racial diversity in her courses. In her article “Leave Your Identity at the Door? Politics of Difference and Contact Improvisation” published in *Contact Quarterly*’s Summer/Fall issue of 2003, Prince recalls that there was not a single student of color in her Continuing Contact class.⁷⁵ If students of color had desired to take the class, they could have freely enrolled, but the lack of interest contradicts the idea that contact improvisation is practiced openly and equally by people of every race. While contact improvisation’s global expansion to continents such as Asia and South America has undoubtedly increased the racial diversity of today’s practitioners, it is worthwhile to investigate indicators of diversity other than external appearance, such as educational, economic, and social background, within an international context. By doing so, we can better understand the connections between practitioners in America and abroad, and thus arrive at an informed conclusion regarding the form’s communicative power across language and cultural barriers.

An Examination of Contact Improvisation in Multiple Cultures—Qualifying the Form’s Communicative Capabilities

The body of contact improvisers that exists today—inclusive of Italians, Russians, Chinese, and Brazilians—is far more diverse in terms of nationality and race than was the original contact community in 1972. As practitioners in America traveled abroad and as visitors shared their experiences with colleagues in their home countries, the practice of contact improvisation fluidly spread throughout an international population of dancers, picking up different nuances and qualities during each transmission of information.⁷⁶ Documentation of this expansion has largely been in the form of personal accounts and conference proceedings published in *Contact*

⁷⁵ Prince, 57.

⁷⁶ See for example Irina Harris, “Contact Italian Style,” *Contact Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1983): 33-35.

Quarterly.⁷⁷ While these anecdotes confirm contact's transferability to people who speak different languages and who come from different cultural backgrounds than practitioners in America, authors have attributed the exchange of ideas and information among practitioners to the physical aspects of the form without fully qualifying all of the circumstances that led to their positive experiences. Under the right conditions, communication can be achieved across cultural borders, but it is also important to recognize how characteristics of the international body of contact improvisers parallel those of the current American body of practitioners, for this suggests that commonly-held values may supplement the form's physical qualities that promote communication.

Cheryl Pallant's experience teaching contact improvisation as an informal extracurricular activity in South Korea provides an illuminating example of how contact improvisation—a practice that rests upon democratic ideals—translates in a vastly different cultural environment. Pallant recalls that in South Korea, cultural norms do not permit people of the opposite sex to touch in public. Moreover, the idea of men and women spending time together as friends is a new concept, practiced mostly by Koreans in their twenties.⁷⁸ When Pallant began teaching her students, the basic premise of contact improvisation—physical touch and intimate interaction—was thus a challenge. Pallant had to give verbal permission to many of the men because they had been taught never to touch an elder, teacher, or woman in public.⁷⁹ Despite initial challenges, Pallant witnessed individual transformations similar to those described by American contact improvisation teacher Heidi Henderson—increased individual awareness of somatic events as well as the ability to negotiate effectively when dancing in duets.⁸⁰ Pallant's experience underscores the cultural transferability of the form; centered upon non-verbal communication, the teaching of

⁷⁷ See for example Nancy Stark Smith, "Me, We," *Contact Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 3, and Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag, "What We Use in Our Teaching and Why: The Vienna Research Project," *Contact Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2007): 27-31.

⁷⁸ Cheryl Pallant, personal e-mail to the author, 22 November 2011.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

contact improvisation can be adapted to meet the needs of people who speak different languages and who live under contrasting circumstances to result in parallel experiences. Nevertheless, an important qualifier to the comparison between Henderson's and Pallant's experiences remains unspoken.

In both situations, the practitioners were young, college-educated students who had voluntarily elected to participate in a course (in Henderson's case) or an extracurricular activity (as was the case in South Korea). These social characteristics match those of practitioners in American universities, highlighting the form's appeal to a specific population who shares the intellectual curiosity implied by the pursuit of a college degree. Given the existing social restrictions and customs in South Korea, it seems unlikely that a group of adults would have been able to open up to the practice and experience its positive communicative benefits as did the twenty-year-old, progressively-minded students. In this case, the lack of "diversity" between American and international students of contact improvisation seems to indicate that even if the form does promote communication through its physical demands, practitioners may also share certain values (e.g. willingness to explore movement in close physical contact) that initially attract them to the practice and that make communication easier. This observation does not disprove contact improvisation's ability to promote communication through the physical aspects of the form (i.e. sensing, egalitarianism, physics, and touch), but instead identifies another influential factor that contextualizes the form's utopian achievements within social reality. A second example of how contact improvisation facilitated communication between an American and a Russian practitioner builds upon this point.

On the surface, improviser Joanna Cashman's experience in Russia as part of the 1987 Arts for Peace tour appears to confirm contact improvisation's ability to facilitate communication among people of completely different races and languages. Having seen Cashman dance on stage,

a Russian man in the audience named Sergei made a request to dance with her. Upon meeting, it was clear that their verbal communication, which consisted of broken Russian and English, held little promise.⁸¹ As they started improvising together, however, they were able to establish common ground—the physical relationship between the human body, gravity, and inertia. Cashman recalled her amazement that after only minutes of dancing together, the pair was able to perform on stage and were even mistaken for long-time dance partners. She said, “It was magic. The universal language of dance had allowed us to communicate across culture and language barriers.”⁸² The non-verbal, physical language of contact improvisation allowed Cashman to communicate when verbal language could not. However, one must also recognize that certain pre-conditions, in addition to the dance itself, led to the pair’s meeting and successful exchange.

In a country where modern dance had been banned since the imposition of Socialist Realism in the 1930s, Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberating policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the 1980s brought a burst of creativity among artists.⁸³ Accordingly, the Arts for Peace tour attracted a certain group of people who were eager to explore their creative freedom and learn about American modern dance, which had been born in a liberal, democratic environment.⁸⁴ This lust for new artistic experience was mixed with Sergei’s somewhat romantic advances toward Cashman, and as Cashman admits, the circumstances of the situation—an uncommon opportunity to engage with foreign artists who were so interested in her work—allowed her to step beyond her personal boundaries. In jam settings in America, she would have been less willing to communicate with practitioners who expressed sexual interest along with curiosity about the practice as Sergei had

⁸¹ Cashman, 61.

⁸² Ibid., 61-62.

⁸³ Ibid., 62. *Glasnost* and *perestroika* were policies that initiated the restructuring of the Soviet Union’s government and economy, placing an emphasis on openness and transparency. These policies relaxed restrictions on personal expression and artistic creativity. (Note that the following source utilizes an alternative spelling of *perestroika*.) Edward A. Hewett and Victor H. Winston, eds., *Milestones in Glasnost and Perestroika: Politics and People*, (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 6 and 396.

⁸⁴ Cashman, 62.

done.⁸⁵ While contact improvisation provided a non-verbal language through which the two practitioners could communicate, this communication deserves qualification—it was supplemented by a newly established, democratized freedom to explore art as well as a shared passion for dance among young, experimental artists.

As underscored by Cashman’s experience in Russia, the idea that contact improvisation serves as a non-verbal “language” has emerged with the form’s international expansion. Nancy Stark Smith’s extensive involvement teaching and practicing contact improvisation worldwide has led her to synthesize and generalize the experiences that authors such as Pallant and Cashman describe. According to Smith, a contact practitioner develops a trusting relationship with his or her partner, even if that person is a complete stranger who speaks another language. She argues that contact improvisation is, in itself, a language through which people can communicate that is not partial to economic standing, politics, or race.⁸⁶ Upon initial consideration, my personal experience practicing contact with Hervé Koubi’s all-male Algerian dance troupe seems to validate Smith’s claim. Only one or two of the male participants understood English and the majority of the American students did not speak French, making verbal communication difficult between partners. Despite racial differences as well as contrasting cultural environments in which the two groups of dancers were raised, we found that we could communicate our artistic ideas through movement. However, this idealized portrayal leaves out important, underlying factors that facilitated the exchange. Foremost, Stefanie Batten Bland mediated the exchange through verbal communication, providing instructions in both French and English before the dancers attempted any of the exercises. Secondly, this exchange took place on Western soil, in a setting that was comparable to a formal class or university course. Bland’s guidance fostered an educational environment that

⁸⁵ Cashman, 62

⁸⁶ Smith, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer.

allowed the Algerian men to engage in contact-based movement with women without penalty, even though this would not have been possible in Algeria.⁸⁷ Thirdly, both groups consisted of young artists in their twenties or thirties who shared a passion for movement and a desire to learn about other cultures during international travel. In this sense, although our exchange overcame differences in race and economic status, France's liberal political environment, Bland's instruction, and a shared desire for cross-cultural exchange undoubtedly influenced the success of the workshop, beyond the communicative capabilities of the form itself.

External attributes such as race and language have encouraged the perception of "diversity" within the contact community, but as these examples illustrate, superficial observations may not fully encompass all of the factors that draw people to the practice. In reality, there are underlying traits shared among contact practitioners that both attract them to contact improvisation and predispose them to successful communication. For example, contact's stronghold in universities suggests the continued presence of middle-class, college educated participants, whereas Cashman's experience in Russia and my experience in France demonstrate that these underlying factors also include a liberal environment in which to practice and openness to intimate physical contact. Thus it should be noted that contact improvisation is not necessarily the sole facilitator of communication between practitioners.

Understanding the non-verbal "language" of contact improvisation with this qualification leads to yet another question of transferability. If the physics and physicality of contact improvisation truly constitute a language, then do the lessons learned through that language remain specific to the form, or is there a second element of transferability that bridges movement practice and everyday life? To practitioners in the 1970s, the connection between political ideals and the practice of contact improvisation was evident; a communal environment and the freedom to

⁸⁷ Bland, personal e-mail to the author.

explore movement without the restrictions of choreography empowered individuals by directly embodying social and political virtues of the time.⁸⁸ In today's increasingly globalized world, however, contact improvisation exists in numerous political and social environments. Thus, the direct relationship between the practice of contact improvisation and the embodiment of political sentiments is no longer as clear as it once was. This does not mean that the positive qualities of contact improvisation have ceased to spill over into everyday life. It does mean that the topic needs to be readdressed, taking into consideration the international expansion of the practice.

Chapter 3: "Improvisation is a Word for Something that Can't Keep a Name"⁸⁹—The Future of Contact Improvisation in an Increasingly Interconnected, Globalized Society

What Happened to the Small Dance? Contact Improvisation and the Threat of Dilution

Before one can consider how the positive effects learned through contact improvisation can spill over into everyday life, one must first acknowledge how the form's global expansion may have altered the experience of practicing contact improvisation itself. As demonstrated by my personal ignorance of Paxton's Small Dance, the non-codification of contact improvisation has both facilitated its international expansion and has resulted in a body of practitioners with different conceptualizations of what the form entails. Daniel Lepkoff agrees on this point, saying "Over the years, the defining concept [of contact improvisation] has dissolved, and for many young dancers, even those who have studied [contact improvisation] a lot, the basic defining concept of the work is totally unknown."⁹⁰ The defining concept to which Lepkoff refers includes not only the cultivation of inner awareness, but also the principles of physics and gravity that are intended to guide the form's flow of movement. While the lack of copyright and the absence of formal

⁸⁸ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 37-38.

⁸⁹ Steve Paxton, "Improvisation is...." *Contact Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1987): 15-19.

⁹⁰ Daniel Lepkoff, "Thoughts on Contact Improvisation: An Issue of Definition," *Contact Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2004): 64.

teaching certification programs has allowed contact to spread to a wide range of people and to be integrated into various forms of dance training, this same virtuous quality poses a threat to the integrity of the practice.

The threat of dilution is an issue that concerns many dance scholars, including Mary Fulkerson who teaches Release technique in colleges and workshops around the world.⁹¹ Fulkerson observes, “there are now very many choreographers who attribute their ‘partnering’ to Contact [Improvisation] without really knowing to what they refer. The heart of the matter [is] sometimes lost in a flurry of imitation.”⁹² In addition to the misattribution of contact improvisation in choreography, teachers have observed this trend toward “imitation” both in the United States and abroad. Having personally witnessed this phenomenon among the pre-teenage students that I taught in California, I found it interesting that Cheryl Pallant also observed students’ failure to grasp the “spontaneous sensing” process of contact improvisation when teaching in Hong Kong. As long as Pallant continued to call out instructions, the Chinese students willingly put their bodies into physical contact, but when she stopped giving explicit directives and encouraged students to improvise freely on their own, the students stopped dancing within minutes.⁹³ In China, a Communist country, the political environment has shaped cultural norms that require students to closely follow directions,⁹⁴ and thus it is less surprising that this “imitation” takes place. However, the fact that this trend has been observed in both the U.S. and China suggests that the globalization of the form could continue to dilute the core principles of contact improvisation in other countries and cultures. Fulkerson notes that, “The challenge for Contact [Improvisation] in the future, as I

⁹¹ Mary O’Donnell Fulkerson, “Mary O’Donnell Fulkerson—ReleaseDance,” <<http://releasedance.com/>> (21 October 2011). In Release, movement is inspired by “images” that are often initially anatomical in nature. See Mary O’Donnell Fulkerson, “Release Dance Curriculum written for ARTEZ, Arnhem, the Netherlands,” (Dance Curriculum, ARTEZ Arnhem Academy of Visual Arts, 2005-2006), 1-21.

⁹² Mary Fulkerson, “Taking the Glove Without the Hand,” *Contact Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1996): 42.

⁹³ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 87-89.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

see it, would be to grasp the essence of the form—that being an involvement in the ongoing questions of improvised dance dialogue with emphasis on principles of physics.”⁹⁵ During the practice of contact improvisation, one’s intentions must be curious and sensitive, not choreographed. Yet, with a non-codified practice, how does one ensure that practitioners remain true to the basic principles of the form and therefore continue to benefit from the positive qualities that it can elicit?

The use of “scores” in contact improvisation seems to be the closest thing to a guide or protocol that the form possesses. Scores come in different forms, but are often written directives that provide imagery or starting points for improvisation. As David Koteen points out, the essence of a score—the provision of instruction to create a choreographic sequence—seems to conflict with the principles of contact improvisation.⁹⁶ However, Nancy Stark Smith refutes this. She argues that the form itself is a score; it is “a focus, a set of parameters for improvising”⁹⁷ that falls under the broader umbrella of “improvisation.” Smith, herself, has created a universal score—The Underscore—that provides descriptive words such as “kinesphere,” “intersection,” and “bonding with the earth,”⁹⁸ to guide the exploration of movement and to awaken the body to the basic principles of contact improvisation.⁹⁹ Scores such as Smith’s have been utilized in countries around the world when teachers are unavailable to convey the principles of the practice. In Irina Harris’s article “Contact Italian Style,” she notes that when she began practicing contact improvisation in Italy in the early 1980s, all she had for instruction was “a mimeo sheet of exercises and ideas from [a] workshop” that a visiting friend had left behind.¹⁰⁰ Scores have the potential to offer continuity of practice between global populations, but given the premise of

⁹⁵ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 42.

⁹⁶ Koteen and Smith, 48.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, 33.

contact improvisation as a form of spontaneous movement generation, one must be careful not to impose a prescribed technique. If structure replaces the decision-making and inquiry within a contact improvisation partnership, the genuine communication demanded by the form could be lost.¹⁰¹

Digestion and Reinterpretation

The threat of contact improvisation's dilution operates not only through physical elements of the practice, but also through intellectual inquiry. The non-choreographed, fluid form of contact improvisation allows each practitioner to have a contrasting, individualized experience. One example of the individual inquiry that contact improvisation can inspire comes from an e-mail exchange between Nancy Stark Smith and a practitioner named Carolina, who lives on the island of Palma de Mallorca in the Mediterranean. In her e-mail to Smith in 2007, Carolina enquired about the "Sacred Feeling" cultivated by the practice of contact improvisation. Having recently experienced spiritual effects from practicing contact, Carolina asked Smith what the creators of the form had been feeling during the first week of its practice in New York City.¹⁰² She asked when the creators first felt the Sacred Feeling and when they knew that it was more than just pure physics.¹⁰³ For Carolina, the spiritual sensations that she experienced while practicing contact were consistent enough to lead her to believe that spirituality was actually built into the form. Yet, she did not take that feeling for granted.¹⁰⁴ Carolina researched her perceptions, asking Smith directly whether the creators of contact improvisation intended for the Sacred Feeling to be a part of the practice.

While Paxton, Smith, and the rest of contact improvisation's founders may not have intended for spirituality to enter into the form, Carolina's question underscores a critical

¹⁰¹ Fulkerson, "Taking the Glove Without the Hand," 41.

¹⁰² Smith, telephone interview by Erin Stahmer.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

implication. The individualized experiences of practitioners, as they each participate in contact improvisation in relation to their specific environment, result in a range of opinions and ideas of what the form is supposed to, and can, elicit. This ambiguity is, in a sense, one of the most “freeing” aspects of contact improvisation. In the process of questioning and interpreting, one not only enters into intellectual conversation with other practitioners, but also begins to contemplate the physical experience of contact improvisation in light of its larger implications—how it may affect everyday life.

Bodies in Translation—Can the “Virtues” of Contact Improvisation Truly Spill Over into Everyday Interactions?

In the 1970s, practitioners often lived in communal settings where “dance and life overlapped and mingled for many participants in contact improvisation,” creating the potential for a social movement to stem from the practice.¹⁰⁵ However, as many of these collective living situations dissolved during the economic downturn of the 1980s and as the form became increasingly integrated into formal dance training, the potential for widespread social involvement faded. Nevertheless, on an individual basis, practitioners in America have adopted the 1970s mentality of fluidity between social values and the practice, continuing to see contact as a “way of life” that is not sequestered within the walls of a dance studio.¹⁰⁶ For example, in Cheryl Pallant’s book *Contact Improvisation: An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form* published in 2006, she claims that “It’s no surprise that principles from the dance influence community members, [sic] lives.”¹⁰⁷ To support her claim, Pallant offers several anecdotal accounts of practitioners who have applied contact’s principles of communication to interactions outside of jams and classes. German contact improviser Andrew Wass, for example, attests that the confidence he has gained through contact improvisation has affected his interactions with people on the street. He says, “You know

¹⁰⁵ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 194.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 138.

those times when you almost bump into someone and that little shuffle dance happens, both go left then right, then left again? Embarrassed smiles on both sides. [*sic*] Now I am more likely just to pick a direction and trust the other person to take care of themselves [*sic*].”¹⁰⁸ But do these personal accounts offer conclusive evidence that the core values of contact improvisation universally transfer into practitioners’ everyday lives?

The broad, utopian claim that lessons in communication, negotiation, and self-confidence “unsurprisingly” spill over from the practice into everyday life deserves reconsideration given the form’s international expansion over the past four decades. A closer examination of the examples provided in Pallant’s book reveals that all of her examples come from practitioners in liberal, democratic societies. Pallant’s more recent experience teaching in South Korea ironically proves that the claims made in her book may not be as universally true as she had expected. In a personal e-mail, Pallant admits that the transferability between the practice of contact improvisation and everyday life is not as feasible within the constraints of South Korean culture as it is in America.¹⁰⁹ She notes that to directly transfer the communicative virtues learned in contact improvisation to social life would be to break from the norm, which is highly frowned upon.¹¹⁰ One is not only expected, but is highly praised for fulfilling long-standing cultural expectations, which discourage people of the opposite sex from touching or even spending significant time together in public.¹¹¹ Even on a less literal level, Pallant’s experience teaching Chinese students in Hong Kong underscores how the increased confidence described by Wass may not transfer in a society where the good of the collective is prioritized over individual empowerment.¹¹² Although the practice of contact improvisation is transferable to different cultures within the open, safe environment of a

¹⁰⁸ Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 90.

¹⁰⁹ Pallant, personal e-mail to the author.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 88-89.

dance studio, the transferability of its physical principles and communicative virtues into everyday life are not as easily achieved.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to recognize that the stories of transferability published in *Contact Quarterly* primarily consist of the positive experiences that practitioners have had while in America and abroad.¹¹³ Would practitioners take the time to write articles about the way that contact improvisation has failed to influence their lives? The absence of such stories in past issues of *Contact Quarterly* indicates that this is not the case. It is also worthwhile to note that *Contact Quarterly*'s publishing directors—Nancy Stark Smith and Lisa Nelson—are highly invested in the form's continued practice and social following. Although their investment embraces discussions of the challenges that contact improvisation faces as it evolves from one generation to the next, at Smith's core, her long-standing involvement with the form and the positive ways it has affected her own life have reinforced her belief in contact's utopian communicative virtues.¹¹⁴ Thus the stories that we read and hear are those of positive, personal experiences, whereas the situations in which contact's positive effects do not transfer beyond the dance environment most likely slip through the cracks of published literature.

Pallant's personal realization that the "unsurprising" translation of contact's lessons into everyday life may not be as automatic as she originally claimed underscores an important qualification to the broad utopian claims of contact's early practitioners. While personal anecdotes should not be discounted, what is important to recognize is that the connection between dance and social life that once existed in the 1970s is no longer assured. On an individual basis, practitioners may find ways in which the form spills over into their daily lives—whether it helps them communicate their ideas more clearly, or whether it allows them to recognize and adjust their own

¹¹³ See for example Martin Keogh, "Excursion: Uruguay (Air), Dancing Under Different Constellations," *Contact Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 31.

¹¹⁴ Smith, Interview by Erin Stahmer.

actions in a stressful situation¹¹⁵—but with the form’s global expansion, non-Western cultural restraints may prevent such direct translation for some practitioners.

Conclusion

The physical analysis of contact improvisation in Chapter 1 reveals that contact improvisation does, in fact, have the potential to elicit cooperation, communication, and trust, but these positive qualities are in no way automatic or guaranteed. The virtues lauded by authors of contact improvisation and its practitioners are conditional upon the integrity of the contact improvisation community. Joanna Cashman’s observations at public jams where women were inappropriately touched with sexual intentions underscore the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable use of the principles of contact improvisation—physical intimacy and touch. In order to preserve the practice space as one in which participants can indulge the senses in a roller coaster ride of thrilling, yet safe, physical movement, practitioners and instructors must attend to the factors that threaten to dismantle the “positive” qualities previously mentioned.

Egalitarianism, for example, promotes open communication among practitioners, yet the threat of natural hierarchy is an ongoing concern that did not disappear with the creation of Country Jam in 1979. Prevention of hierarchy, which can initiate self-judgment and negative valuation, seems to, at minimum, require an active awareness of the possible threat. Necessary action, such as Heidi Henderson’s protocol to avoid peer observation and demonstration, will change depending on the particular group of practitioners and the social setting in which contact improvisation is practiced, but pre-empting issues of sexualized touch, safety, and personal boundaries preserves the integrity of the practice more successfully than managing issues

¹¹⁵ See examples provided in Pallant, *Contact Improvisation*, 139.

retrospectively; for some of Cashman’s female colleagues, one or two negative experiences at contact improvisation jams were enough to keep them from ever returning to the practice.¹¹⁶

These negative examples should not suggest, however, that the threats associated with the practice of contact improvisation will necessarily develop. Social and cultural environment challenges practitioners’ abilities to practice contact improvisation in such a way that the positive virtues are prioritized over all other biases, but as Hervé Koubi’s men demonstrated, these barriers can be overcome in a community of mixed backgrounds. While the success of my American-Algerian exchange can be *partially* attributed to the physical qualities of the form, what I have argued is that innate, unifying characteristics of today’s practitioners are often overlooked when evaluating contact improvisation’s ability to facilitate communication.

Author Cynthia Novack acknowledges how the social and economic changes throughout the 1980s led to the “institutionalization” of the practice, from primarily a social jam experience into formal classes and universities. What she did not emphasize, however, is how that shift in venue served as a reinforcing mechanism—one that would perpetuate the “elitism” or selectivity that concerned practitioners in the 1970s.¹¹⁷ It is tempting to associate the globalization of contact improvisation with increased social and economic diversity among practitioners, but as demonstrated by Pallant’s experiences teaching contact improvisation in South Korea and Hong Kong, globalization is not necessarily synonymous with increased diversity in the full meaning of the word. In these examples, the 1970s stereotype of “young, college-educated, white, middle-class”¹¹⁸ practitioners only diversified in terms of race. The assimilation of contact improvisation into American universities suggests continuity between the physiognomy of the original contact community and today’s global practitioners, at least for a portion of the contact population.

¹¹⁶ Cashman, 61.

¹¹⁷ Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 213.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

While my experience in France and Cashman's experience in Russia emphasize the fact that similarities in educational background and social class are not necessarily required for positive cross-cultural communication, these examples do illustrate how the shared values that initially attract contact improvisers to the practice (i.e. willingness to engage in close physical contact and a desire to learn about experimental art in different cultures) can supplement the form's physical traits that promote communication. This observation does not disprove Cashman's claim that through the non-verbal "language" of contact improvisation, she was able to sense and react to shifts in her partner's weight, and thus communicate artistic ideas within a process of spontaneous movement generation.¹¹⁹ Instead, this observation recognizes the full range of factors that influence contact's ability to facilitate communication and provides a more realistic conception of the utopian claims that authors and practitioners have made. Overestimation of contact improvisation's power as a language can induce unreasonable expectations for "seamless" exchanges between global practitioners, when in fact, situations in which communication is less intuitive may signify the expansion of the form to include people of different economic or educational (not just racial) backgrounds. The first step to encompassing true diversity within the contact community is to limit the perceived universality of contact's positive effects to personal experience; while some practitioners may vouch for the success of contact improvisation as a non-verbal language, others may not always experience effortless communication with a partner.

With this qualification comes a second challenge to the broad, idealized claims that practitioners of contact improvisation have made. With the international expansion of the form and the threats of dilution that accompany its adoption by people in different countries and cultures, does the "spillover" effect between practice and everyday life apply to all practitioners? In every culture, the resulting effects of contact improvisation's practice can be different, as is made clear

¹¹⁹ Cashman, 62.

by Carolina's e-mail exchange with Nancy Stark Smith. While articles in *Contact Quarterly* and personal examples shared by authors such as Cheryl Pallant continue the lively exchange of stories in which practitioners are able to apply lessons learned through contact improvisation to their everyday lives, it is important to recognize that the instances where transference between practice and everyday life is *not* possible largely go unpublished. The inapplicability of contact's principles in South Korea, and the observation that many of the positive examples we are given come from practitioners in liberal, Western cultures, suggests that cultural restraints do influence the potential for personal transferability of contact's virtues. The connection between contact improvisation and everyday life may therefore not be as "obvious" as Pallant had originally claimed. Recognition of these qualifications necessitates a more accurate description of how this form transfers to the now globalized body of practitioners.

By redefining contact improvisation as, itself, the ability to "pose and maintain a question,"¹²⁰ the utopian claims of contact's movement experience can be rationalized and accepted for their applicability on a personal level. Daniel Lepkoff explains that the process of questioning that takes place during contact improvisation is not formulated on the conscious level of the verbal mind, but rather, in the tissues of the body.¹²¹ The body's nerves, brain, and muscles construct questions such as "What parts of my body are being touched?" and "Where could my weight move next?"¹²² thus triggering physical reactions to external stimuli. Defined as a process of personal questioning, Lepkoff's theory allows us to acknowledge the qualifications that temper contact's ability to facilitate communication without discrediting the experiences of individuals who so clearly see the transferability between the practice and their everyday life. Whether the result of this process of questioning is increased confidence, a heightened level of cooperation, or

¹²⁰ Daniel Lepkoff, "Contact Improvisation: A Question," *Contact Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2011): 39.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 39.

the ability to communicate one's ideas more clearly, it is then up to the individual to apply what they experience within the social reality that shapes their everyday life. Understanding the full spectrum of characteristics and shared values that facilitate communication between contact improvisers allows us to fully appreciate the exceptional moments when contact improvisation's communicative power transcends the dance floor.

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