The Experiment Called Contact Improvisation,

By Keith Hennessy.

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Contact Improvisation defies any specific definition or historical analysis. The dancer most often credited for CI's development is ambivalent about his role and some of CI's early participants have divergent stories about the development of the work. Following improvisational process and the intelligence of the dance itself, early practitioners resisted a suggestion to codify the form and certify the teachers. Telling a Bay Area history is further complicated by an attempt to counter-balance historical favoring of NY artists and histories. And most histories are reduced to narratives of single male heroes, dismissing or minimizing the significant contributions of women and collectives.

In *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, Cynthia Novack tracks CI's roots to a variety of sources including: 1950s and 60s popular dance cultures, NY and SF avant garde dance-performance-theatre scenes, social movements for gender and sex liberation, somatics and new body therapies, and the influence of Japanese and Chinese martial arts forms, specifically aikido and tai chi.

Before CI's unofficial naming in 1972 there were many experiments, exercises, performances and scores that engaged a new kind of touch and weight exchange; more engaged with gravity and less dependent on gender. Key American artists and events included Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneeman, The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton's Lightfall, Nita Little's Crawling Under/Over score, Simone Forti's Huddle, Mary Fulkerson's Anatomical Release, Robert Ellis Dunn's composition class at the Cunningham studio and many more.

Brown, Rainer, Forti and many others who were central to dance's evolution in the 60s and 70s spent time in the Bay Area working with Anna Halprin. A dance pioneer who moved to Marin County in the 50s with her husband Lawrence Halprin, Anna merged influences as divergent as the Beats, Fluxus, Civil Rights, human anatomy, child developmental movement, landscape design, experimental film, physical comedy, and a deep commitment to being in and listening to nature. Until recently Halprin's role in contemporary dance history has been under-reported. A major museum exhibit produced in France (presented in SF at Yerba Buena, 2008) and a wonderful new book, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*, by Janice Ross, recognize Halprin's seminal contributions.

Contact Improv's birth is most often attributed to a series of experiments in 1972-73 instigated by Steve Paxton. Paxton had been researching, teaching and performing new approaches to dance (and life) with Merce Cunningham/John Cage, Judson Church Dance Theatre (1961-64), and Grand Union (1970-76). The Judson performances, by an evolving collective that included over 40 artists, are recognized by many as a key 'moment' in the evolution and rupture called post-modern dance.

Paxton staged two pioneering events in 1972. Magnesium, a project created during a Grand Union residency at Oberlin College in January 1972. The performance involved Paxton and eleven male students on a large wrestling mat in a near wild series of falls, leaps and collisions followed by Paxton's signature 'stand' or 'small dance.' The small dance is the micro movement of the body's balancing, adjusting, sensing and responding to gravity. The whole piece, documented on video by Steve Christiansen, lasted just over ten minutes. Local choreographer and dance advocate Brenda Way was working at Oberlin during this era and played a key role in nurturing early CI experiments.

Six months later there was a five-day performance installation, or open process performance, at the John Weber Gallery in New York. With a $2000 grant Steve invited 12-15 students and colleagues he'd met while teaching at Oberlin, Bennington, and Rochester to live and work together for two weeks. The performances, lasting five hours daily, were presented more as a visual

art event-happening-installation rather than as a dance concert. Audiences were small, coming and going at their own pace. Christiansen videotaped daily providing immediate feedback to the impromptu company. In the video "Chute," a ten-minute montage of clips from Weber, we can recognize the falling, spiraling, yielding and flying of two bodies that has become a transnational language called Contact Improvisation.

At the center of the experiment called Contact Improvisation is a (utopian?) proposal for democratic social relations reduced to its simplest form: an improvised encounter between two people. Referring to the usual choreographic process as a dictatorship of teachers and choreographers creating watered-down versions of themselves, Paxton attempted a less authoritarian form of leadership based on suggestion, invitation, improvisation, and collaboration (Novack, p. 54). CI reflects the counter-cultural context from which it emerged. Feminist and youth resistance to hierarchy and tradition responded to a harsh realization of the injustices of American 'democracy.' Challenges to consumerism and capitalist recuperation of culture led some people to an anti-private property lifestyle, inspiring artists to make art beyond product or object. Live, immediate, collaborative encounters were prioritized: the Happening, the Action, the Collective. By 1972, the Vietnam War was ending in disaster. Nearly 60,000 Americans and over two million Vietnamese were dead (Numbers are contested, no official Viet count). The leadership of the Black Panthers had been mostly killed by police or were in prison for life. Four white students had been shot at Kent State and millions had heard of vibrant queer resistance to a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a NY gay bar. Paxton, reflecting back on the era and considering CI's development in Argentina and Israel during political crises in the 1990s, suggests that CI might be a shock absorber for social trauma.

Soon after the John Weber shows, three of the dancers, Nita Little, Curt Siddall and Nancy Stark Smith, moved to the Bay Area. Home to the country's most influential counter-culture, the Bay Area featured a vibrant experimental performance scene that included historically significant artists such as The SF Mime Troupe, Anna Halprin and the psychedelic drag family The Cockettes.

Theresa Dickenson moved to the Bay Area in 1969 after five years of dancing with Twyla Tharp and encounters with The Grand Union. Eager to work both collectively and experimentally she performed with the women's collectives Freefly and Motion and co-founded Tumbleweed in 1973. Initially a vehicle for Dickenson's choreography, the group became a collective in which all members created dances often using CI in both choreographic research and improvised performances. Consuelo Faust and Rhodessa Jones were among the dozen or so members. Dickenson recalled that, "Working collectively, intimately, and improvisationally turned out to be good preparation for Contact when it showed up."

Contact Improv was first seen and practiced in the Bay Area in February 1973. Jani Novak, who had been a buddy of Dickenson's at the Cunningham studio in NY, organized a series called "People Are Dancing" which included choreographed and improvisational work as well as jams. Dickenson notes that it was common for the audience to dance after or even during the show. In February the series hosted Steve Paxton and the Oberlin/Weber dancers who were touring the West Coast with a show called *You Come We'll Show You What We Do*. The group included Paxton, Nita Little, Karen Radler, Nancy Stark Smith, and Curt Siddall. The performances and subsequent jams were presented at both the Natural Dance Studio (owned by Nina Wise and Susan Jackson) in Oakland and at the Firehouse Theatre (now the Lumiere) in San Francisco.

Little taught CI at the Natural Dance Studio in September of 1974, which was, to her knowledge, the first official on-going CI class in California. She remembers the studio hosting a number of events in the mid-70s including a CI Dance Marathon. She, Smith and others organized a Contact Symposium in 1975 to discuss issues. Meanwhile they were still getting together with Steve Paxton and others to tour CI under the name (and variations) of ReUnion. Smith printed a couple Contact newsletters while living in Marin County and in 1975 the newsletter evolved to become Contact Quarterly. Based in Northampton MA, the biannual CQ continues to be a living archive for developments in the forms, communities, evolutions and reverberations of contact improv.

In 1976 two pioneering men's collectives gave their first performances in San Francisco, The Gay Men's Theatre Collective and Mangrove. The GMTC, influenced by feminist process and politics, created Crimes Against Nature, a dance-theatre hybrid fantasia of coming out stories, radical critique and queer visioning. Mangrove improvised performances that included spoken text and physical comedy as well as the intimate and playful touch and weight that was common to CI. After meeting at local jams, five men – Curt Siddall, Jim Tyler, John LeFan, Aaron Hemmen and Byron Brown – performed at five different venues around the Bay Area. They charged $2 a show. Prioritizing performance improvisations Mangrove became one of the most visible CI ensembles through local, national and international tours.

I asked Mangrove dancer Byron Brown about favorite moments that seem to define the time. He mentioned several, including: "Jani Novak doing Boko Maru evenings at a warehouse in SOMA where you were blindfolded, brought upstairs in a freight elevator, ushered into a large space with classical music, had your shoes removed and had warm oil poured over your feet before you could see anything." Mangrove collaborated with Tumbleweed (men and women's collectives together) and with Ed Mock, a Black jazz dancer and virtuoso improviser. Brown also recounted a Mangrove performance at Terry Sendgraff's annual birthday event in which they wore paper suits that tore until the men were naked.

Brown remembers, "There was an amazing alternative dance/theatre community in the 70s. It was alive and fluid with people collaborating in different ways as well as watching, visiting and supporting each other. There were many venues in the form of small and midsize studios where it was easy to work and perform and publicity was fairly easy and audiences were interested."

Sara Shelton Mann, a protégé of Murray Louis and Alwin Nikolai, first danced Contact with Peter Bingham and Andrew Harwood in Canada. Illustrating the migratory lineage that makes dance history, Little reminded me that she was Harwood's first CI teacher in the mid-70s in Vancouver. Mann founded Contraband in 1979 and moved to the Bay Area soon after. Mangrove dissolved into a non-profit called Mixed Bag Productions which produced a

series of seminal projects and eventually was transformed into the administrative home-base for Mann's Contraband, a company that integrated CI in research and teaching, and became a leading proponent of contact improvisation in contemporary performance.

I asked Ernie Adams, who toured with Mangrove to Europe in 1980, how he would describe the Bay Area dance/performance scene during the 70s? Adams responded, "Experimental, collaborative, collective, youth oriented, sensual, sexual, artistically and spiritually driven, a quest for self, for an alternative to modern dance and ballet, a move away from abstract art, a move towards dance as life…" He concluded with, "It was a great time to be a dancer in San Francisco."

Martin Keogh moved to the Bay Area in 1978 and started dancing CI in 1980. In his first year of study he worked with nineteen teachers. Keogh recalls, "I arrived doing contact at the first big apex of the form. In 1980 there were thirteen contact improv companies in the US and Canada. In 1980 Reagan was elected and things changed! By 1982 there was not one CI company still in existence." For a few years Keogh ran the only jam in the Bay Area at the Presbyterian Church in Berkeley. Then the Harbin Jams started which brought people together for intensive retreats, and inspired Andrew Clibinoff to propose an annual festival. Founded as a collaborative venture by many of the local teachers The West Coast Contact Improvisation Festival (WCCIF) became an annual gathering for the local community as well as a model for CI events around the world. Despite the gaps between funded dance companies and those who perform CI, contact-based performances are still frequent in much of the world, primarily in the context of the growing number of CI-related festivals from Tel Aviv to Buenos Aires, from Rome to Seattle.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:
This is a first installment of a larger research project. Future work will include a discussion of Bay Area dialect or style. I apologize to any and all for errors and omissions. Your corrections and additions, personal stories and favorite events are very welcome. Thanks: keith@circozero.org

FOOT NOTES:

Paxton, Steve. CI Founders' Talk facilitated by Keith Hennessy at CI36, Juniata College, June 2008.

Novack, Cynthia J. *Sharing the Dance, Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Univ of Wisconsin: Madison. 1990.

Ross, Janice. *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*. UC Press. 2007.

All quotes are from email or telephone interviews with the author.

Grand Union (1970-1976): Evolved from Yvonne Rainer's Continuous Project Altered Daily in which rehearsal process was integrated into the performance. Trisha Brown, Barbara Dilley, Douglass Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy Lewis, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer.

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Keith Hennessy was born in a mining town in Northern Ontario, Canada, lives in San Francisco, and tours internationally. He is an award-winning performer, choreographer, teacher and organizer. Hennessy directs Circo Zero, a laboratory for live performance that plays with genre and expectation. Rooted in dance, Hennessy's work embodies a unique hybrid of performance art, music, visual and conceptual art, circus, and ritual.

https://dancersgroup.org/2008/10/the-experiment-called-contact-improvisation/