Steve Paxton's "Interior Techniques": Contact Improvisation and Political Power

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Contact Improvisation and Political Power  

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[1]In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?

— Michel Foucault 1984:45

What had the culture physically suppressed or selected out [...] which we might reclaim?

— Steve Paxton 1993:64

According to Steve Paxton, the idea in the practice of contact improvisation (CI), whose seminal performance Magnesium took place at Oberlin College in January 1972, is to discover, through spontaneous movement in contact (typically duets) with others, human movement (and human behavior in general) that is “pleasant, highly stimulating, and elemental” (1993:64) to us as interactive human organisms. There is no set choreography, no specific instruction.

1. Duets are typical; trios or larger groups are not impossible, but the more bodies, the more difficult it is to attend to all the bodies involved.
Improvisers in the space continuously choose their own movement, when, how long, and with whom they will dance. *Magnesium* was a continuation of Paxton’s experimentation with improvisation in duets, begun two years earlier with members of the Grand Union (1970–1976), after several years as a dancer with Merce Cunningham, José Limón, and Judson Dance Theater: “The totally improvisational company that the Grand Union unintentionally became bypasses the grand game of choreographer and company. There, ego-play is the issue, and those gentle means of assuming authority or submitting to it had, in the past, been played thoroughly by the members” (Paxton 1972:130). In contact improvisation, on the other hand,

following or allowing oneself to lead is each member’s continual responsibility. The security of pre-set material is only occasionally indulged in, since it seems to get in the way of amplified self-exploration that arises in improvisatory performance. The weighty theatrical tradition of subjecting one’s self to another person’s aesthetic of time-space-effort manipulation is ignored in favor of the attempt to be emancipated without confining or restricting others. (131)

If this attempt were successful, it would achieve more satisfying dance studio and performance hall relations. But Paxton also explained that emancipation or constraint in our movement and contact was a form of political power: “We are conditioned to voluntary slavery. In a democracy, dictators must demand that others be slaves; fortunately for the dictators, the American life produces slaves who are unaware of the mechanism of that production. The ties that bind are the ties that blind” (1972:131). This conditioning in unawareness produces “gestures, modes of posture [...] behavior [...] which constitute [the] proper social activities and communications [...] as well as the accompanying mental attitudes we acquire or aspire to for proper presentation of our ‘selves’” (Paxton 1993:64): What we learn in school for the most part is “to sit still and focus our attention for hours each day. The missing potential here is obvious — movement of the body and varieties of peripheral sensing.” We are disciplined in “constraints and taboos of touching” that undermine our potential for satisfying physical contact (64).

Paxton observed this general cultural production of (though he did not use the term) disciplinary bodies in dance practices as well. Instead of being a freer space of cultural production, “[i]n dance — one laboratory for exploring the human body and all it carries with it in this life — repression of possibilities is the general rule, mirroring social forms” (1972:133). In the dance classroom and rehearsal or performance space, most dancers are physically isolated: “in class each person is equally spaced from all the others in floor work, or sequentially isolated when moving across the floor [...] That each person must stay within his isolated space allotment [...] is typical of our culture” (133). We are afraid of proximity, and therefore respond

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2. “What had the culture physically suppressed or selected out — certain gestures, modes of posture and behavior (i.e., body language) which constitute proper social activities and communications, as well as the accompanying mental attitudes we acquire or aspire to for proper presentation of our ‘selves’ — which we might reclaim?” (Paxton 1993:64).

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to “crowding” by avoiding contact—“condensing the field [of movement] into a tight little bubble around the person,” or by “withdrawning inside the skin wall” (133); “There is dignity for the mind even if the messages of the body must be ignored. The understanding of personal space is social/habitual and since the habit is defensive, having that space invaded can be shocking” (133).

In general, Paxton observed, dance companies, whether they were classical, modern, or post-modern, had practiced the same disciplinary techniques and reinforced the same hierarchical power relations as in society generally:

Many social forms were used during the 1960s to accomplish dance. In ballet, the traditional courtly hierarchy continued. In modern dance (Graham, Limón, Lang, et al.), the same social form was used except magicians rather than monarchs held sway. Post-modern dancers (Cunningham, Marsicano, Waring) maintained alchemical dictatorships, turning ordinary materials into gold, but continuing to draw from classical and modern-classical sources of dance company organization. It was the star system. It is difficult to make the general public understand other systems, inundated as we are with the exploitation of personality and appearance in every aspect of theatre [...T]his basic poverty of understanding on the audiences’ part is a drag [...]. (1972:131; see also Novack 1990:58–59)

Paxton, for his part, desired “unique and personalized forms” (131) of dance practice. His dissatisfaction with these hierarchical power relations, in which directors and dancers reproduced impersonal dance practices (and perpetuated their audiences’ demand for the impersonal), motivated Paxton’s experiments with improvising in contact, during his time at the Grand Union and after.3

If the hierarchical organization of power through the technical and organizational rules governing both dance and society were the problem, then perhaps by removing these restrictions one could find a freer type of movement and contact. Paxton’s innovation, therefore, was to eliminate the “external” constraints that produced these inhibitions, and see what happened. Paxton set up movement experiments in which there was no teacher, director, correction, discipline, no set choreography, and no specific instruction. From Paxton’s perspective, CI’s potential impact would be to return decision-making authority to the dancer—not just the institutional professional, but anyone who moved. CI could “reclaim” the potential that “the culture” had “physically suppressed or selected out” (1993:64). It would do this precisely by developing our “habit of attention,” a habit underdeveloped in Western movement in general. In particular we lack “sensitization to the corporeal” (64). In Western movement, in our sports and dance, Paxton contended, the proper performance of a particular, choreographed, and controlled form of movement was prioritized; the sensation of movement was merely secondary. In CI, on the other hand, “behavior evolves from sensing movement” (64). The aikido roll, for example, requires attention to sensation (on the back and neck) for its proper execution; dancers taught the roll in a Western way (to achieve external form alone) tended to reproduce habitual actions associated with the performance of a forward roll/somersault, rather than the aikido roll. The latter could, therefore, be broken down into parts that allowed one to feel its sensations.

3. Paxton (b. 1939) continues to teach and to experiment with his body even now.

4. It is not clear whether Paxton had read Foucault at the time of the writing of this article: 1993. Paxton is discussing the “thoughts that went through” his head in the six months between Magnesium in January and the presentation of the developing work, by then called “contact improvisation,” in New York in June 1972. Certainly in 1972, it would have been unlikely, though the article is written retrospectively.

5. For example, closing the eyes as a self-protection response (and, consequentially, becoming disoriented), rolling down the center of the back (rather than from one shoulder across to the other side of the lower back).
This breaking down into parts, or slowing down of movement was crucial; if one wanted to achieve free, spontaneous movement instead of culturally imposed, habitual movement, one must develop a habit of awareness in relation to the reflexive reactions of the body, which were more basic. Paxton “took the working model” for his investigations to be “a simple imaginary person with no physical, sensorial, or social inhibitions [...], a generic person with positive elements I had observed in many students, dancers, martial artists, and children” (1993:64), as well as in partners, and himself, while doing CI. Whereas “planetary” experience/evolution had established and “tuned our potentials,” “cultural things develop[ed] select parts of the potential” (64; emphasis added). What were the unexplored possibilities of movement (i.e., behavior) general to humans as generic bodies, “tuned” by a shared evolution, unfettered by “physical, social, or sensorial” inhibitions? One could find this individual by becoming aware of the way the body “reflexively” interacts with its environment. And this needed to be developed slowly, because when something happens “which is too fast for thought” (e.g., when we are spinning or rolling very quickly), consciousness “goes away.” Nevertheless, we can train consciousness to “hang in” with the body when it is moving fast as well. Through specifically designed exercises, we can remain aware of the body’s systems reflexively interacting with “weight, momentum, friction, the touch of their partner, the sensation of the floor under their body [...and our] peripheral vision of the space” (64). For example, by closing one’s eyes while standing, one could become aware of the tiny postural adjustments to shifts in weight. Consciousness would observe and be taught by the reflexes. This new knowledge of what was merely reflex would become the “new ground for moving” and allow “spontaneous” improvisation (63).

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6. Taking weight from and giving weight to a partner was to be “slowly developed over months.” Flexibility should be gradually improved by hatha yoga, emphasizing awareness of (the reflex activities involved in) breathing and posture (Paxton 1975:42).

7. In this confusing discussion, Paxton juxtaposes the “conscious” with the “reflexive,” saying that consciousness must “leave” because of the speed of the event/stimulus, but then that consciousness can be trained to “stay” and just observe. Consciousness’s leaving is first innate and uncontrollable, and then, contradictorily, cultural and trainable. As for Paxton’s distinction between “reflexive” and “cultural” behaviors, those reflexes that remain outside of the domain of conscious influence beyond the first year of life are very few — including the plantar reflex, cranial nerve reflexes, and tendon reflexes. Postural “reflexes,” the ones that Paxton seems really to be referring to, on the other hand, are influenced by conscious awareness (and therefore culture) from early on. Indeed, this seems to be the basis of Paxton’s observations regarding “modes of posture” that are culturally imposed.

8. “Does the nervous system and its mediation of posture relative to gravity have the possibility of teaching the consciousness, and does the consciousness have the property of amplifying or strengthening that mediation? I assumed this reciprocity did exist” (Paxton 1993:66).
Steve Paxton

9. The second performance, after Magnesium in January, took place in the John Weber Gallery, June 1972, with rehearsals in a Manhattan Chinatown loft where the dancers also lived during the rehearsal period. Cynthia Novack observes that the performance was merely a continuation of rehearsal. Each performance lasted five hours, the audience coming and going as they pleased; there was no special music, lighting, costumes, or sets, except for the wrestling mat (see Novack 1990:68).

With this developing awareness of reflexes, with consciousness not under culture’s influence—no longer trying to control, and, instead, simply watching, dancing would be “flowing streams of movement” that were “accidental [...] pleasant, highly stimulating, and elemental”—i.e., reflexive interaction, “a basic mode of communication between the reflexes of people as they moved” (Paxton 1993:64). Cultural habits, on the other hand, would manifest as “blocks” or “gaps” in conscious awareness, and would be worked through patiently and calmly, whether they were “emotional, orientational, or habitual” (65). This calm, patient work was made possible because early CI practice for performances often involved long, intense live-in training, in which dancers would get to know each other very well, developing trust and awareness of themselves and their dance partners. Paxton summed up the essential principles as follows:

[Images [based on real sensations] were used to focus the mind and then give the mind foci within the sensations of the body.

The words had to be unambiguous, unthreatening, informative, and generally understood.

The statements had to be true, obvious, and relevant. (66)

CI’s images would not involve “fictitious gasses” (62), but rather real sensations. The image would correspond to the real experience of the individual in understandable, defined terms. CI would be a practice of “freedom of interaction in the social set,” based in habits of awareness, aimed at “producing freedom for individuals of a group, spurring them on to new awareness” (1972:131). Performances would be the practice itself and both would transmit not the virtuosic and hierarchical “star-system,” but the pleasant and highly stimulating freedom of interaction to their audiences, who might become participants. The first tour of the work in 1973 was called You come. We’ll show you what we do.

The effect was powerful, for both dancers and audiences. Contact improvisers working with Paxton in the 1970s reported feelings during the practice and performances (which were merely the practice but with an audience) of “tremendous tension and excitement about encountering anybody, an anticipation, not knowing what was going to happen—whether you were going to dance slowly, hardly move, do a lot of lifting and falling, or whether it was going to be sensuous

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Figures 2–4. David Jan Jurasek performing aikido roll at Dovercourt House, Toronto, March 2008. (2) Transfer of weight onto upper arm, neck, shoulder; (3) transfer through shoulder; (4) transfer onto upper back. (Photos by Robert Turner)
or kind of playful and combative [...] There was a sense of danger in it, always” (Lisa Nelson in Novack 1990:70–71). The effects of this ambivalent tension persisted even after dancing; dancers reported that they felt “extremely energized” (72). And these effects were transmitted to audiences.10 Audience’s reactions and responses were empathetic:

What happened, I think, was that sensations were transmitted to the audience. They would come out of the performances flushed and sweating, almost, and thrilled as if they had been doing it themselves [...] To tell the truth, I don’t think there was one performance we did that wasn’t very enthusiastically received. It was like we had offered something to people as a way of looking at movement and a way of experiencing movement that was very new and healthy, very vital and life-supporting. And it was very refreshing to people, I think. (Nancy Stark Smith in Novack 1990:72)11

In some performances, audience members would actually dance themselves—“jumping all over one another,” and remaining long after the end of the performance, often initiating interaction with the performers:

They would really want to start rolling around and jump on you [...] they would embrace you after a performance to congratulate you, but they’d hang on you, lean on you [...] I think that [...] seeing how long it was possible to touch somebody and not come away was very infectious [...] There was something that really unified everybody. (Lisa Nelson in Novack 1990:73)

There was a “tremendous feeling of accessibility between performers and audience” (73). Many of these audience members would go on to practice CI themselves, having, some performers noted, already learned the practice from watching a single performance.

The performances were like a demonstration. It was very rough and you could drop in and out and it was okay [...] Duets would last ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes even twenty. The solo work in between was more episodic, usually very weight-oriented, jumping and falling, and falling and rolling [...] When everyone had a chance with as many people as possible, it would be over. As a person in the audience, and as a learning performer, you really got to see how the different levels would occur, starting from the more tentative contact, perhaps, to a real physical contact, bumping up against each other, to some very poignant, very soft communicative duet [...] (Lisa Nelson in Novack 1990:71; emphasis added)

Contact improvisation’s ability to affect audiences was something Paxton himself was aware of: “it is through the eyes that the audience begins a kinetic response, or a physical empathy with the dancer” ([1987] 1997:125). And, as the performers describe, it also provided audiences with an introduction to the method. They might not be prohibited from joining performances, and certainly were not prohibited from joining the practice. (This continues to be the case.) Paxton would go on to call CI “a kind of grass roots community work” ([1989] 1997:167).12 Through

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10. By the same associational conditioning that happens throughout the neural (synaptic) micro-structure of the brain, we are capable of, to an extent limited by our experience, feeling the movement and sensations of others’ movement/behavior by way of attending to the signs associated with that movement (see Buxbaum et al. 2005:226–39).

11. “The performances were so exciting, and it thrilled me to be in them [...] I always felt there was a gut-level response from the audience about what they were seeing. You understand that this is just my impression, but the response—the applause, the ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs,’ the laughter—was just a real physical response” (Danny Lepkoff in Novack 1990:72).

12. Paxton also implies that Grand Union members were at least sometimes thinking of politics; they “were influenced as much by their shared past and the particular focus on new developments in collective action as by their own decisions about the future” (Paxton 1972:131; emphasis added).
the practice, one could, in close interaction with others with uncertain/unpredictable roles, movements, and contact, become more aware of, clear about, and accustomed to the ambivalent tension (i.e., anxiety) involved in awareness of one’s decision-making authority in direct relation to others with decision-making authority. This encouragement of a radically participatory, active subject—capable of acting assertively and attentively in determining its own life, liberty, and happiness—was and is CI’s political potential. After Paxton, one must ask not whether but how one’s movement and contact result from and affect relationships of power in society. If we are conditioned in specific habits of docility (obedience, non-confrontation) toward our institutional authorities (parents, teachers, employers, directors, political parties, and so on), habits that therefore guarantee existing distributions of power and keep us generally alienated from each other and ourselves along conventional lines, then CI—by drawing attention to these power-creating and maintaining habits, offering spontaneous, interactive movement possibilities, and accustoming us to making conscious decisions in uncertain conditions—might begin redistributing power among us and providing more satisfying relations. CI’s “interior techniques” could encourage us individually and collectively to act more directly, to take increasingly active responsibility—through our liberal political and societal institutions, or if necessary through other means—in the determination of our own lives.

A new publication, Contact Quarterly, was established in 1975, to disseminate the central ideas of the practice, as well as encourage a broader discussion by practitioners and teachers—a discussion of the direct experience of one’s sensations in simple, truthful words (or images) that recalled the CI practice and techniques and could be used to guide further interaction. The artist, Paxton wrote, had “responsibilities to these techniques to keep them clear of confusion” ([1975/76] 1997:5).

No sooner than the popularization of CI in dance studios and print had begun, however, Paxton expressed unhappiness with the direction its teaching and discourse were taking:

I want to go on record as being pro-physical-sensation in the teaching of this material. The symbolism, mysticism, psychology, spiritualism are horse-drivel. In actually teaching the stand or discussing momentum or gravity, I think each teacher should stick to sensational facts. (in Novack 1990:81–82)

By the end of the decade, members of the Grand Union had isolated themselves in their own CI practices, and the growing CI community of new teachers’ practices, including their textual discourse, deviated and continue to deviate even further from Paxton’s original emphases and writing.

Paxton had emphasized the importance of: (a) direct descriptions of real sensations as a basis for interaction; (b) CI’s potential to produce freedom for the group; (c) using unambiguous and informative words when teaching, to inform the actual practice of CI; and (d) rejecting our “voluntary slavery” to a “star-system” by making performance an indistinguishable extension of practice, with decision-making authority restored to the dancer. Despite Paxton’s intentions, CI was soon (and continues to be) largely: (a) reconceived as internal body experiments or somatic education describing the sensation, for example, of the small dance (see for example Woodhull [1977/78] 1997:24–26) as an aesthetic experience, rather than information to be used in CI interaction; (b) characterized as a therapy developing the individual’s “personal power and strength of presence” useful for “performing” in all areas of daily life and therefore a legitimate part of college curricula (Lepkoff [1979/80] 1997:55); (c) described and taught using

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13. An important exception, Lisa Nelson’s “tuning scores” are (like Paxton’s method) designed to draw attention to the “physical base of the imagination,” to make conscious the movement patterns the organism uses to interact with (including its perception of) its environment, “the details of human movement that are made invisible, edited out by our cultural conditioning, dance trainings, and marketable Western concert dance,” and to encourage a more direct and indeterminate relationship with one’s environment ([2006] 2008a).
metaphor and poetry, as, for example, a “spiritual” endeavor concerned with “getting at the soul of our dance” by means of metaphor (Keogh [1989] 1997:182); and (d) almost never discussed as affecting change in political power; those few discussions of “politics” that occurred were strictly focused on issues internal to the jam community—how CI eliminated role-related gender inequalities in contact jams (see Brown [1977/78] 1997:18), and, contrarily, how it created new, internal hierarchies and elites (Novack [1988] 1997:140–41; see also Svane [1987] 1997:130–31; and Pritchard [1990] 1997:196–98). Moreover, CI’s partial inclusion in college dance and theatre curricula depended on demonstrating its now developed repertory of specific technical movements, observing the typical hierarchical conventions: choreography; set repertory; typical distinctions between audience and performer.

Paxton, though he was critical, said generally that it was “important that the vision” of contact improvisation “was cloudy,” since a “true group process” could not evolve if its “course” were already “completely predetermined” (1972:131). He had seen this divergence occur with the members of the Grand Union—because its structure could “open up all the possibilities,” it also “eventually led to isolation of its members” (131). To be sure, this divergence can in part be explained by a new generation of teachers, removed from Paxton—the “father” and by far the most articulate disseminator of CI—in writing (in Contact Quarterly and elsewhere), teaching, and performances. But the new versions of CI emerging in the discourse and practice, instead of exploring “all the possibilities” seemed to limit them, narrowly defining CI in terms more amenable to (or even as a variation of) American liberal cultural practice in general. CI had become (and continues to be) a personal aesthetics, a celebration of individualism and individual experience (including the heroization of its star performers), and a religious experience described in metaphorical terms. Its political significance has been, for the most part, ignored and underanalyzed.

But this divergence also seems to be in part due to the physiological understanding conveyed in Paxton’s own practice—his teaching and (largely written) discourse. The problem was not that Paxton did not persistently attend to the body; articles and transcripts of classes attest to Paxton’s consistency in explicitly describing real sensations and references to actual body parts (see Paxton [1986] 1997). He also continued to insist on CI as a group work creating “deep bonds” ([1989] 1997:167). Some statements tended towards the abstract and metaphorical—for example, “quality to quality, receiving what is given. a [sic] volley-ball of karma” ([1977/78] 1997:34)—and possibly spiritualist—“Does the class seek purity? If so, special learner will receive pure energy and pure intensity” (34); but this way of speaking occurred within texts that, again, are concerned primarily with teaching awareness of bodily sensation. And Paxton’s extended, intellectual discussions were, similarly, concerned with the body, the philosophy of science and language, and how the endocrine system can speed up or slow down our experience of time ([1987] 1997:125–29).

The problem, rather, was that Paxton’s physiological discussions, though explicit and detailed, relied on and reinforced certain conceptual oppositions—specifically, the repeated opposition of the “reflex” and “bodily,” on the one hand, to mere “habit,” “culture,” and “consciousness,” on the other. The body and its reflexes could be free, spontaneous, uninhibited, unfettered, if it were allowed to act without consciousness’s interference, its cultural blocks, gaps, impositions, and habits. CI was reflexes dancing with reflexes, consciousness merely watching: “While in contact, we attend to our reflexes, which have been stimulated by the
other’s movements. Our reflexes move us, and this causes our partner to move. This cycle of movement responses is continuous and forms the basis of the dialogue” ([1987] 1997:129). As a result, experienced (as opposed to beginner) CI dancers were their reflexes and their bodies ([1988] 1997:143). Consciousness might even be bypassed; improvisers might “sink the conscious mind into more appropriate states” ([1980/81] 1997:69). Read attentively, Paxton’s writings are far more complicated, but this simple and reductive opposition was what participants and many teachers appear to have remembered and disseminated. As Novack puts it, “participants took the focus on physical aspects as a neutral value, a part of natural law rather than an aesthetic (cultural) overlay” (1990:68).17

Paxton’s students and future practitioners, now reliant upon the fantasy of unconscious and reflexive, “natural” human interaction and relations, have generally ignored the fact that Paxton explicitly placed his hope for the future of human movement and contact precisely in the development (i.e., acculturation) of consciousness:18 “one’s subjective understanding will continue to grow, and more parts of one’s body will come under conscious training” ([1992] 1997:253). Sometimes, it was a combination of “reflex and intuition” ([1980/81] 1997:68) that explained the pleasure experienced in contact improvisers’ duets; dancers learned to have confidence in their “choices.” Whereas in most of Paxton’s statements the process of evolution of the reflexive body is credited as the basis of freedom, in others “the habit of adaptation [...] will keep us reproducing the system” ([1987] 1997:129; emphasis added). Consciousness—at least in these latter statements—is not the problem but the solution. Paxton noted that he was comfortable with discrepancies like these; “CI has always abounded in logical contradictions” ([1989] 1997:167). Most of the rest of the CI community, however, chose to ignore the contradictions and instead think in more familiar—ironically, culturally habitual—terms, avoiding the question of consciousness and culture altogether. For Paxton’s heirs, CI was an activity of the body and the soul; the body itself became spiritual, and one needed to be free from the mind. The body’s precultural status eliminated any need to address the cultural production of one’s entire organism (consciousness as part of the body), and even the need to change the habit-producing institutions of our culture/s (i.e., family, school, corporation, and government). If one could simply supersede a 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? One’s relationship to the world and even oneself now became highly metaphoric.

Paxton’s repeated association of the body with reflex, on the one hand, and culture with conscious inhibition, on the other, helped secure in his early students-become-teachers the divergence of the teaching and textual discourse away from an understanding and overcoming of one’s inhibitions—inhbitions which many (teachers, students, and the outside dance community) expected to disappear into an egalitarian utopia once they entered the studio (Novack [1988] 1997:129, 166). Equally significant was the dissociation of relaxation from tension (Paxton 1972:124);19 since tension was cultural, it was to be avoided. Moments of tension could be resolved (instead of observed or investigated) by going back to one’s bodily sensations and

17. This is evident even in Lisa Nelson’s “pre-technique,” which, she writes, is “grounded in the play of the body,” allowing one “to revisit the magical world of the child, pre-naming” ([2006] 2008a). Nelson differentiates between the “animal” and the “cultural body,” which are “often at odds” (2008b).

18. Again, Lisa Nelson is a notable exception here, constantly emphasizing observation of “one’s patterns, process, strategies and appetite for becoming physicalized, i.e., awake, alert [...]” When she teaches, she tries “to create a learning environment that is the essence of performance, and to unite dance and the performance of observation” ([2006] 2008a).

19. “New material comes into range with the ability to relax into contact and attune movement awareness to the demands of the situation. The body can move more swiftly when it acts out of intuition rather than prejudice. Relationships become possible at high speeds that would be arduous if slowed. It becomes evident that dancers have been only touching the surface” (Paxton 1972:134).
Neurobiological, neuropsychological, and psychological research indicates that: (a) Consciousness is aware of but avoids stimuli that one is conditioned to fear, rather than disappears because “the body” or its reflexes are faster and wiser; (b) Conscious experience — of culture — is necessary for the development and change of reflexes; (c) Consciousness itself behaves like a reflex, automatically attending to fearful, rewarding, and novel (i.e., arousing) stimuli to produce ambivalent tension (i.e., tonic motor readiness [see Tucker 1999:537–58]) and recallable memory; (d) Ambivalent tension capacitates conscious attention to stimuli, thoughts, feelings, and external objects (including people and parts of people) one habitually avoids; (e) This avoidance conditioning may result from disciplinary conditioning; and (f) Associated memories evoked by confrontation with fear-conditioned stimuli can indicate the causal (conditioning) disciplinary techniques and institutional practices. See Turner (2008:151–212).

This opposition of an allegedly enslaving consciousness to an allegedly pre-cultural, free body has its discursive effect on our habit through our consciousness (by directing our attention away from thought and culture), distracting us from our selves and from this very effect itself. If consciousness is in fact bodily (inextricably part of the body), and therefore always involved in the conditioning of habit, then ignoring culture and thought/discourse only serves to maintain our voluntary slavery. Whereas attention to these habits and means of establishing — or changing — them would almost certainly provide greater freedom/power and satisfaction, distraction from our habits of docility will continue to guarantee their perpetuation and the hierarchical relations they result from and maintain.

One can observe such habits of docility (and their means of alteration) in CI as it is experienced by its students/practitioners, in North America in particular. Although improvisers are given the freedom to choose their partners (or no partner), when their duets will begin and end, their type of movement (or no movement), beginners worry about and feel humiliation when improvising, even when dancing alone, despite the fact that the movement poses no obvious threat to participants or spectators. The dancer feels anxious, thinks judgmental, self-deprecating thoughts, recalls previous experiences of humiliation, gets scared of other people’s judgment, and in response often initiates habitual (usually recognizable) movement forms (for example, ballet or modern dance movement, if they are in his/her training, or performance of a recognized character/role).

The spontaneous physical interaction of contact usually compounds this basic improvisational fear. As with improvisational solo movement, the more unfamiliar the form, the greater the feeling of anxiety and fear. The participant generally avoids extended visual, manual, pubic, and abdominal contact, between not just the same but also opposite genders, again, even when it poses no immediate physical threat and can, when engaged in, provide feelings of pleasure. When this contact does occur, the dancer tends to interpret it conventionally — as a sign of the other’s attraction or repulsion, approval or judgment; she often reports feeling “confused” or intensely ambivalent. She appears to default into habitual, conventional movement forms (heterosexual duets, men lifting women, performing romance or conflict), even when she

20. Neurobiological, neuropsychological, and psychological research indicates that: (a) Consciousness is aware of but avoids stimuli that one is conditioned to fear, rather than disappears because “the body” or its reflexes are faster and wiser; (b) Conscious experience — of culture — is necessary for the development and change of reflexes; (c) Consciousness itself behaves like a reflex, automatically attending to fearful, rewarding, and novel (i.e., arousing) stimuli to produce ambivalent tension (i.e., tonic motor readiness [see Tucker 1999:537–58]) and recallable memory; (d) Ambivalent tension capacitates conscious attention to stimuli, thoughts, feelings, and external objects (including people and parts of people) one habitually avoids; (e) This avoidance conditioning may result from disciplinary conditioning; and (f) Associated memories evoked by confrontation with fear-conditioned stimuli can indicate the causal (conditioning) disciplinary techniques and institutional practices. See Turner (2008:151–212).

21. The following observations (where it is not indicated otherwise) on improvisational dance are based on informal interviews with dancers from North America and all over Europe, my own experience in contact improvisation, and responses to my presentation of this perspective as a formal paper at CI36, the June 2008 36th anniversary celebration of the beginning of “Contact Improvisation” in 1972.
intends to be spontaneous. In organized performances of contact improvisation these patterns can be even more marked, and often persist in more experienced improvisers.

But these patterns, though corroborated by the majority of contact improvisers, are nevertheless not generally discussed in specific terms in either *Contact Quarterly* or the CI community. Improvisers all have their own particular experiences, some of course more intense or extreme than others, but their habits of movement and observations of the apparent reproduction of “impersonal” dance practices and judgment in their own CI practices overlap generally enough to suggest that they (and we who live in the same culture/s) share a pervasive and successful (though not total) conditioning in habits of obedience, which acts to maintain the status quo, and keep them (and us) from satisfying individual and collective interaction, both inside and outside the dance studio. To the extent that experienced contact improvisers become more daring and improvisational, they tend to understand and relay their experience in the generally metaphorical terms of existing CI discourse—as unrelated to the rest of their past and present experience and conditioning in their society and culture. Because their satisfaction with and experiments in improvisation tend to be associated with non-public dance studio settings, in particular communities of contact improvisers, and directed by particular teachers, these students will—not understanding the actual means of conditioning or means of satisfaction—limit their experimentation (and satisfaction). CI, therefore, continues to be practiced within the well-established, conventional boundaries of most ballet and modern dance institutions—and in even more sequestered, isolated settings than ballet and modern.

If, however, they do want to become aware of this shared conditioning, free themselves from their docility, and act to do what they want, CI’s teachers, practitioners, and writers will have

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22. Paxton, of course, and Nelson, as we have noted above, repeatedly discuss the cultural conditioning of habits of movement, but not yet in such specific terms; most of the rest of existing CI discourse discusses feelings of constraint or freedom vaguely and primarily using metaphor.
to stop talking about and teaching contact improvisation in metaphors, as a “natural” (not “cultural” or “habitual”), “reflex” and “intuitive” (not “conscious”), or even “spiritual” (not “biological” or “physical”) activity. They will have to become aware of their sensations, feelings, and thoughts in relation to particular movements and kinds of contact—especially in the types of unchoreographed movement and contact that provoke fearful/excited reactions because of previous prohibition but that they also want to do because they are satisfying to themselves and others. CI’s radical political potential is to achieve precisely this kind of satisfying individual and collective decision-making. This potential is Paxton’s great accomplishment—the extensive practice/performance and description of an experimental technique of awareness of the self in relation to others, as the basis for our more expressive, improvisatory interaction.

References


