

A sepia-toned photograph of a forest. The scene is filled with tall, slender trees and a dense forest floor covered in fallen logs and branches. A person is visible in the middle ground, standing near a large log. The overall atmosphere is quiet and natural.

Steve Paxton: Drafting Interior Techniques

edited by
Romain Bigé

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The tactile in-betweens of Contact Improvisation




Alice Godfroy



January 1972. Bodies, off-kilter, leap into the air, hurl themselves at each other, grasp, fall, rise, fall. This strange activity lasts fifteen minutes. Eleven young men wearing sweatpants explore the laws of gravity, on gym mats. We are at Oberlin College. The piece is entitled *Magnesium*. An elemental metal capable of producing a brief, brilliant glow. Clashing of bodies.

June 1972. Collisions, frictions, clashes, rolls. The exploration continues, still on mats, still guided by Steve Paxton. Seventeen dancers, women and men, settle into New York City's John Weber Gallery. The piece is called *Contact Improvisations* and lasts five days, offering itself as a practice to be witnessed. Here one sees clashing give way to improvisation duets, simple falling give way to playful weight exchanges. Tactile dyads.

For the past fifty years, in studios around the world, bodies have been rolling on each other. Entwining, lifting, supporting each other, losing their definite sense of top and bottom. Dancers arrive—often as strangers to each other—to the address of the nearest *jam*—a space for experimentation in which no one leads and everyone dances. These ‘contacters’ sometimes know the name of Steve Paxton, who initiated this great wave and phrased questions that continue to carry them: How to dialogue through touch alone? How to dance without losing contact with another? Contact Improvisation (CI) is the name of the practice, borne of these early 1972 experiments aiming to “[base] movement exploration upon intimate communication (rather than aesthetic dictates).”

A friend described a newly discovered personal symbol. [...] And what, she asked, was my self-symbol? I hadn't one but thought awhile and felt a sense of vibration. A sine wave. Waves brought an image of the ocean and that was almost it... The completion came when I saw the ocean as two fluid bodies in interface—a water ocean and an air ocean both going ... So described this to her as  with time changing , usually going fast. (Paxton 1976b)

These two waves, echoing and signing Steve Paxton's experience, create an empty in-between space that both distances and brings into relationship 'two fluid bodies'. And offers a poetic key, imbued with myriad enigmas surrounding what might go two by two: wanting to touch, to become one, skin to skin, to which Contact Improvisation offers an audacious form.

STUDY

The study begins with suspending assumptions. It becomes radical when we accept calling into question the ground of our experience and its self-evident qualities: most notably, the behavior of our body in action. Steve Paxton is the inexhaustible learner who declared "dance—one laboratory for exploring the human body" (Paxton 1972), this falsely self-evident body, *medium princeps* of all artistic endeavors.

In order to study itself, Steve Paxton's body seizes one tool: attention. Applied as an "active instrument [...], being used as a lens to focus on certain perceptions" (Paxton 1977), this attentional tool is wielded in order to pinpoint that which usually escapes us: the birth of gesture, the detail of sensations. On the one hand, "dancers must hack their basic movement programs in order to adapt to new movements." (Paxton 2018). On the other, they strengthen a sensitive capacity, developing nuance indicators, pegging markers in order to create differentiation within the hazy mass of what is sensed, allowing for "developing discrimination in sensing the body" (Paxton 2018). Indeed, this is the only way to become an experimental body, such as others had already established in the studios of the choreographic avant-garde. Exploring one's own self. Paxton agrees, adding: with another.

This is his genius. The revolutionary gesture with which Paxton opens a whole field of research, generating findings that transform thousands of bodies worldwide. The students and colleagues who accompany him in his early explorations soon become researchers themselves, helping to promote the practice. The study is as inherently built for duets as it is for collective practice. For example, Nancy Stark Smith, who founded *Contact Quarterly*, Lisa Nelson and Steve Christiansen, who film and document the

practice, Danny Lepkoff, Nita Little and countless others, who teach and perform it worldwide. This teamwork multiplies and plants seeds all over the world, all thanks to this slight shift, this step from *one* to *two*, renewing our perspective on the ruins of our individual containers, displacing the study's center of gravity to our trans-individual mysteries. Fundamentally, it suggests that we investigate human movement in the very place it has always spoken: the in-between.

Even further, to inquire into the relational space that a body *is* from the smallest in-between possible, the finest infra-line, tenuous as the horizon joining and disjoining ocean and sky: the place of contact between two surfaces of skin touching. To study the body by being a body, yes, but as a detour: through another body.

THE KEY TO CONTACT

From its inception, the laboratory of Contact Improvisation bore fruit from the elegance, the very simplicity of its experimental proposition: two bodies (reduced to their quality as masses) come into contact (through a touch stripped of its usual cultural attributes) and let themselves be moved with no preconceived movements (they improvise). Their interactions are governed by a single rule consisting of—and this is easier said than done—staying in contact, even as everything would make them lose it: speed of movement, play of weight transfers, disorientation of bodies having lost their usual gravitational coordinates. Apart from this rule, Steve Paxton and his team establish only contours, deciding that the sole inductions would come from the frame of experimentation itself, from this playground devoid of expectations, with no prescribed movement, no imposed figures, no complicity with a pre-established aesthetic and care taken to hold back from saying what should be done. Such an empty frame, so full of potential, obliges us towards a research practice, an endless learning: we are cornered, must learn how to learn. How to move?

The minimalism of this experimental protocol offers a symmetrical counterpart to the complexity of the questions it raises. However, in the studio-laboratory, bodies may seem to be going all over the place, but they are actually not just moving any which way. The proposition of CI is simple, spare and

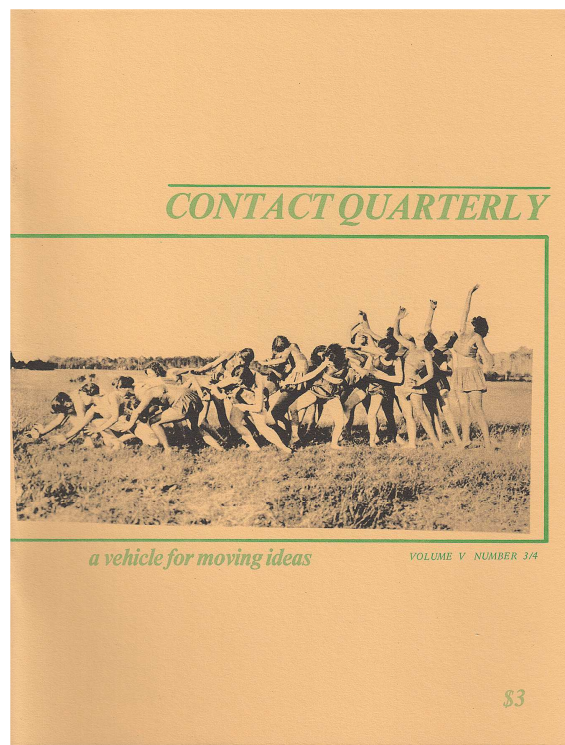
somewhat naked, and yet it is animated by a core inquiry into the possibility of new experiences for bodies in movement, whereby “the student moves from the motivations of reflex and intuition” (Paxton 1981). This is where touch enters the scene powerfully, the key to the practice, as a way to answer its fundamental question. How to allow movement to emerge from intuition and reflex?

Contacters turn the key, open the door to a new way of improvising and, very quickly, enter a double-sided game in which one cannot study touch without, in turn, being studied by it. The tactile revolution is twofold: contact makes (a new kind of) dance possible, the dance in return transforms (known forms of) contact. Here is the question I would like to raise in this chapter, referring to Steve Paxton’s written work, to the phenomenological analysis of Contact Improvisation and our experience of the practice: what has CI done to touch?

THE INFANCY OF TOUCH

Understanding our surroundings with our hands, grasping a branch or an arm, hanging from it, being carried, being enveloped in other people’s skin, communicating through pressure, compression, variations in tone, caresses... these ways of meeting the world through touch continue to mean something to us, even if vaguely. Paxton: “I think that, when I was making it, the first thing I remembered was children playing with adults, and how adults treat the bodies of children: swinging them around, or cuddling them; and the children chasing the adults, trying to get some interaction.” (Paxton 2015) Touch is here, well-hidden in the folds of an archaic memory, planted in the heart of our early childhood, the master communicator among other senses, all of which rely on it.

What happened? A pulling-back, due to our human process of individuation completing itself as we enter into adulthood. Also: a near disappearing, within our Western societies where touch has been relegated to intimate spheres—a local, sporadic use, poorly stretched between the objectifying intimacy of the medical office to the more subjectifying lovers’ bedroom. It is a fact: living as post-modern subjects, we have lost the use of physical contact to understand each other.



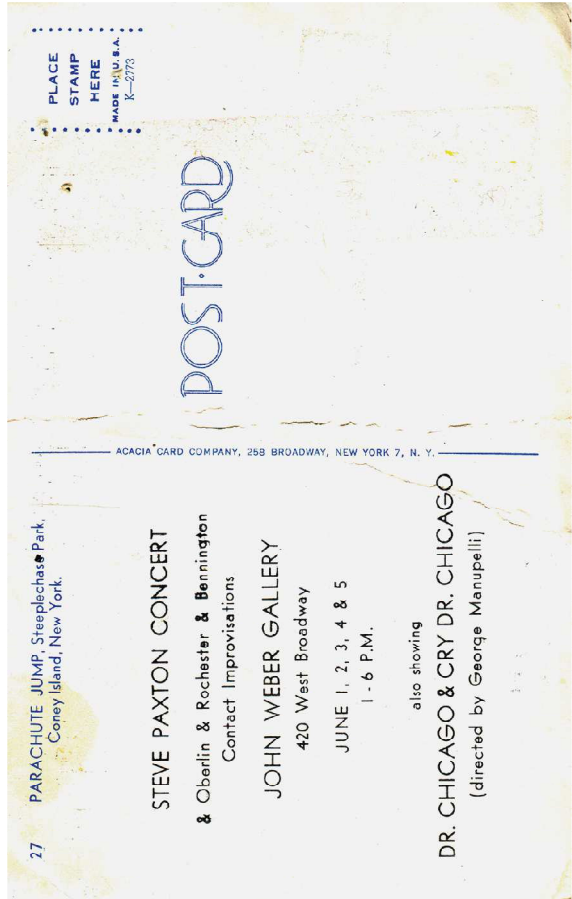
Cover of *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 5(3), Spring/Summer 1980.

The magazine, founded by Nancy Stark Smith in 1975 as a newsletter for Contact Improvisation practitioners, soon evolved into an international journal of dance, improvisation, performance, and contemporary movement arts, still active today.



Original invitation postcard to the first performances of *Contact Improvisations* at the John Weber Gallery in New York, June 1972. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.

Parachute Jump, an amusement park attraction in Brooklyn, NY, is used to portray the physical explorations of contacters, creating a bridge to the passion of children—and some adults that go with them—for experimenting with disorientation.



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POSTCARD

ACACIA CARD COMPANY, 258 BROADWAY, NEW YORK 7, N. Y.

27 PARACHUTE JUMP, Steeplechase Park,
Coney Island, New York.

STEVE PAXTON CONCERT
& Oberlin & Rochester & Bennington
Contact Improvisations

JOHN WEBER GALLERY
420 West Broadway

JUNE 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5
1 - 6 P.M.

also showing

DR. CHICAGO & CRY DR. CHICAGO
(directed by George Manupelli)

steve paxton
contact improvisations



performers

mary fulkerson
david woodberry
danny lepkoff
margot basset

annette la roque
nancy smith
steve paxton
steve christiansen

l'attico - via cesare beccaria 22

25 - 26 - 28 giugno 1973 alle ore 21,30 precise
lunedì - martedì - giovedì -

Poster of the 1973 European premiere of *Contact Improvisations* at Fabio Sargentini's Galleria L'Attico in Rome. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.

DANSPACE AND CONTACT COLLABORATIONS PRESENT

CONTACT AT 10TH & 2ND

NEW YORK CITY
STREET MAP

June 10, Friday: CONTACT IMPROVISATION with Daniel Lepkoff, Steve Paxton, Peter Ryan, Alan Ptashek, Nancy Stark Smith, and others.
 June 11, 12, Sat. Sun.: PARTNERS NIGHT partnerships with Ismael Houston, Jones, and Steve Paxton, moderated by Laurie Booth, Marcie Heiland and Jennifer Smith.
 June 13, Wednesday: CONTACT IMPROVISATION with Jackie Shue and Kristie Simson, and others.
 June 14, Thursday: CONTACT IMPROVISATION with David Appel, Robin Feld, and others.
 June 15, Friday: CHOREOGRAPHY AND IMPROVISATION with Christina Svane, Stephanie Stura and Yvonne Meier, and others.
 June 16, Saturday: NEW YORK PERFORMERS NIGHT with Robin Feld, Daniel Lepkoff, Diane Madden, Nina Martin (film), Stephen Petronio, and others.
 June 17, Sunday: CONTACT IMPROVISATION moderated by Robert Ellis Durrin, Terry O'Reilly, Elizabeth Zimmer, and others.
 CONTACT IMPROVISATION performance at 8:30pm.

St. Mark's Church, 34th Avenue & Terro Street.
 For more information & reservations: 674-9112
 311-475-2222, or 10TH & 2ND Showpass for iOS.
 These performances are made possible by NYSCA & NEA. Poster: Jeffri Terzi

Poster of the 1983 celebration of *Contact Improvisation's 11th Anniversary* at Danspace (St Mark's Church) in New York City. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.



Contact sheet of a ReUnion performance of Contact Improvisation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976. Photos by Uldis Ohaks. Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith.

REUNION

CLASSES IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION IN S.F. AND BERKELEY FEB. 14-19

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	
SL	FM	12:00-3:00 Center for the Inner Arts 328 S. Ingalls Santa Cruz	FM	SS		am and pm
CP	CP		CP SL 630-930		JL Jam	

\$4 each \$5 per day \$15 for 5
SL Skylight Studio 2547 8th St. Berkeley
CP Cat's Paw Palace 2547a 8th St. Berkeley
JL Jenny Lind Hall 2267 Telegraph Oakland
FM Fillmore Studio 3142 Fillmore S.F.
SS Shooting Star Studio 578 Folsom S.F.
morning classes 9:30 - 12
afternoon classes 1 - 4
information 843-2199 eves

Photo: Ted Pushinsky



Poster of a series of classes of Contact Improvisation held by the ReUnion collective in San Francisco and Berkeley, California, in 1976 (with a photo by Ted Pushinsky). Courtesy of Nancy Stark Smith and Kathy Katz.



Spring/Summer 80

CI does not attempt to counter this reduction by somehow reminding us of the body we've inescapably lost. No one can return to their infant-body. We can, however, still observe the degree of the loss. And so, contacters are not so much trying to awaken their infant touch as they are exploring anew the childhood of all touch: touch made transparent, cleared of the constraints that confined it to narrow, normative use. Not only scoured of social and cultural codifications, but also relieved of intentional habits, and, in line with the etymology of infant, *infans*, a touch that 'does not yet speak', fully alive within the silent adventure of the world's physicality. This effort in depotentializing, in clearing touch to its most simple apparatus, transforms it and brings it into its most potent experimental potential. Here, before individuation, beneath language, its powerful qualities come to the surface, opening new modes of relating—to an other, to space, to one's self.

DOUBLE-SIDED TACTILITY

One specific quality of touch, so banal that we barely notice it unless we exert some effort of concentration, is its reflexive structure, that is: the fact that its execution holds a double dynamic between an 'active' gesture (I am touching) and a simultaneous 'passive' gesture (I am touched). I cannot touch without being touched in return. This twin condition suffers from what Hubert Godard has called a "neurosis of the senses" (Godard 2005) by which our perception no longer recognizes that we are touched when we touch, so guided are we by our need to grasp reality, to exercise our objectifying habits. The sensory attunement, or tuning, which we accomplish as we practice CI is an act of resistance against this neurotic perception. We aim to rebalance our senses, notably by revivifying the subjectifying pole of any contact. The experience is surprising. For as soon as I emphasize the gesture of being touched—of being affected by what I touch—I begin to listen. My palpation necessarily slows down, questions, becomes vulnerable, open.

Dancing in physical contact with a partner is like putting your ear to a wall and having a conversation with someone on the other side of it. Like the sounds in the next room, your movements and your partner's are

amplified by the contact, and very little goes unregistered, even if unconsciously. In Contact, skin to skin, weight to weight, you're moved by your partner's movements and in this way able to feel their reflexes, the rush and pause of their time, first hand. (Stark Smith, 1986)

Partners in contact irresistibly begin to move, without one person guiding the other. Yet they do nothing more than listen through their skin. Listen to what? There needs to be some play for a door to swing on its hinges; here it is no longer about knowing whether or not I am touching. The play is happening inside the touch itself. There, I perceive varying degrees, nuances, a growing capacity for modulation. A whole spectrum appears when I journey from the 'active' shore (oriented towards you) to the 'passive' shore (affected by you). I tweak this cursor, playing with varying distance in our relationship. Creating differentials, which invite us to fall into movement.

Contacters work to refine the degrees of the tactile scale. To be tactful, truly, and capable of adapting to the movements of an other they neither know nor are able to predict. Furthermore, they seek to perceive and expand this alterity, this part of otherness alive in each touch, offering its unique perspective. Deepening the in-between space within the relationship, from which inappropriable, mutual movement can arise. This indicates, perhaps counter-intuitively, that touch would be the sense of intimate distances, and that Contact Improvisation be a Distance Improvisation, flourishing only as it carves space within the tangency of bodies.

SPHERICAL SPACE

The martial arts are the arts of war. They have each been forged in the heat of life or death, and have matured through a lineage of survivors. Aikido is of particular interest due to breadth of vision of the situation of war. It does not stress the vs. but the non-polar 'we'. The intense realization which death brings to activity has graced the martial arts including Aikido with efficiency. This elegance of means is based on profound (because essential) informa-

tion of body mechanics, training procedures, and physical possibilities. Here is information embodied in a seamless flow. The concentration which cannot bend. The accommodating winning maneuver. Contact Improvisation is not a martial art. It is perhaps an art sport if it is defined by the context in which it currently operates. The means of teaching are not those of life or death confrontation but life to life confrontation. (Paxton 1976a)

The influence of Aikido infused by Paxton into the nascent form of Contact Improvisation stems from similar necessity in terms of spatial perception. In order to survive in a potentially dangerous space, bodies must develop a vigilance branching out in all directions. One never knows when the next attack—or, in dance, the next contact—might come from. Contacters learn to be ready, to receive and read their partner's movement with their head, shoulders, belly, back, thighs or the soles of their feet. Steve Paxton shares:

In Contact Improvisation, I find I am hanging by my skin. And relying on its information to protect me, to warn me, to feed back to me the data to which I am responding. (Paxton 1982)

Unlike an eye, which flips the world around through its pupil's tiny hole and can only meet the world facing forward, our skin is a special organ, spread around us, made semi-permeable by an infinite amount of pores equipped with sensory captors able to offer us the world with no preferred orientation. Skin opens up another kind of spatiality, never separating us from the world but rather including us in it, as it envelops us.

In order to access the most of its multidirectional potential, it must become equally sensitive all around and not only on the tactile mapping that has made the soles of our feet, our lips, our tongue and, above all, the palms of our hands so hypersensitive with their palpatory capacities. Contacters redistribute the situation, transferring the incredible tact of a hand to the whole surface of their skin, becoming a hand-body capable of touching space with its tiniest folds. Making their bodies equi-touching, establishing a spherical space open to 360 degrees.

In return, this spherical space seems to envelop all partners within a single skin. By overturning visible space and its common structuring of living forms into areas that are more or less welcoming, more or less hostile according to a desired goal, duets enter this non-polarized tactile space, round and inclusive, leading them to feel as though they shared a single body. That they feel *with* another's body, the way a blind person feels with their cane, that they extend into the other, expanding their kinesphere in doing so. This is the other teaching that Paxton maintained from Aikido: being constantly confronted to danger leads to a higher degree of presence: efficient, stripped of excess, unaffected. And even more so, it leads to moving beyond fear and into what one can rightly call love. The adversary becomes a partner, an ally in movement with whom to work rather than fight, and one absorbs the other the way a toreador absorbs his bull. An interesting lesson in mutual anthropophagy, where 'I' and 'you' conjugate none other than 'we'.

What is interesting to me, about [...] Contact Improvisation relative to social structures, whatever they may be called, is that it's a game in which your opponent is yourself and it takes two people to win. As opposed to your opponent being the other and one person wins. (Rainer and Paxton 1997)

A COMMON BODY

CI falls between the social constructs. Haha. It may be a lever which lets us shift the social understanding we receive. It is an activity couched in the terms defined in movements between a parent and infant, i.e. supportive, reflexive, mutual, developmental. In this way, it is fundamentally life-like, at least in the basic moments of emerging life, and maybe we can question why life continues development into individuation, separation, competition, aggression, and so forth into war and atrocity. (Paxton 2015b)

CI proposes novel types of relational space, doing away with notions of social intersubjectivity to the degree that it exists before its emergence, in the inter-corporeal ruction that precedes it. It shows bodies being expropriated, decentered, delocalizing their

centers of gravity to the periphery of their skin: a transit-place for shared gravity. Bodies full of emptiness and pathways, becoming pure interfaces along the lines of the Chinese calligrapher's 'empty hand' as described by poet Henri Michaux: animated only by the desire to not obstruct what moves through it. Bare bodies giving only that which they do not possess: the weight that binds them to the earth. Masses moving around a common cause in mutual agreement, based on reciprocal trust, not based in ideology but rather on knowledge harvested within the very potential of tact.

The ultimate know-how may be this one: by touching what is most physical, most tangible (another body) we may be giving each other the possibility to touch—together—the untouchable within impersonal life, freed of struggle and face-offs. CI will have created an experimental frame in which 'two fluid bodies' work to make their dermic boundaries porous, to the point of potentially dissolving the part of selfhood within us. Robert Ellis Dunn, who helped establish the Judson Dance Theater by opening a class in choreographic composition based on the principles of John Cage, called this phenomenon *the unicorn*. Indeed like this miraculous creature, one never perceives it for more than an instant. Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton refer to it as a *third entity*: a third, neither you nor me, emerges between us, in our dancing, and dances with us.

There is a feeling of a non-dualism coming up, where it isn't me dancing with Steve, Steve dancing with me, but we are in an environment together, and we both condition that environment. (...) The response to that activity, that third thing, is really important too, it seems. It's not that it's dancing you: it's like an equal. (Stark Smith 1983)

This union, this peculiar osmosis we experience in moments of grace offered by Contact Improvisation arrives with a phenomenon of our own core melting, as if it were momentarily vaporized, a cloud in the in-between. In those brief instants, dancers are not even "subjects" enough to be in dialogue: they can only espouse the shared shapes of their common body. In doing so, CI renews possibilities regarding what we might call proto-social life, and fiercely criticizes all philosophies of

identity and alterity. Turning the key of touch operates a radical change of plan, from intersubjectivity to intercorporeality, from the parliament of subjects to a conspiracy of bodies.

Contact Improvisation is a dance of communication through touch: a testing-ground for weight, forces and identities. Within this communication, it can for brief flashes open into moments of communion. This is perhaps also what Paxton's digraph, the two-waved symbol, unveils: a promise to suspend adversarial subjectivities. A Tao for dancing. A different way of living.



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