

# Contact Improvisation

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What happens when I focus my attention on the sensations of gravity, the earth, and my partner?

By: Daniel Lepkoff Dec. 1998

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I learned *Contact Improvisation* from Steve Paxton. I met Steve shortly before *Contact Improvisation* first emerged in public. He came to The University of Rochester in 1971 where I was studying both mathematics and dance. He led a 24 hour dance class. We gathered in the studio in the early evening, constructed a tent-like enclosure with a large silk parachute that was tied to the ballet bars and supported on wooden sticks set carefully on the dance floor. It was cozy. We hung out talking, telling stories, and singing songs until we fell asleep. When I awoke, I rolled over, opened my eyes, and noticed that a small group of people were already at work, sitting in a circle in the morning sun. I joined them. We were carefully examining the process of breathing, considering the inhale, the exhale, and the transitions between. The day proceeded in a spacious and leisurely pace. By the early afternoon we had built up to standing and walking and by late afternoon were exploring some rudimentary *Contact Improvisation* exercises. I believe we worked with the lower legs. There was lots of time, time to listen to Steve's thoughts and images, and time to sit in silence, being aware of ones physical sensations and perceptions, conscious of "ones animal" (a concept Steve often used in these early years). In retrospect the message of this workshop was that it is conceivable to LIVE in ones experience of the body and that living in ones body need not be confined to dance class, but is a way to spend time, anytime, and perhaps all the time.

This memory gives a flavor of the context in which I began my work with *Contact Improvisation*.

Steve Paxton's concept of "ones animal" was compelling. His words, "take care of your animal", carried a gentle, earthy, and mysterious message. The concept points to the presence of a being underlying the socialized self, a being underlying that part of the self which is expressed through verbal language, linear thought, and movement behavior appropriate to civilized spaces. "Ones animal" is a physical intelligence composed of movement patterns and reflexes, both inherited and learned, that form our ability to

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survive and to meet and play energetically with our environment .

A main aspect of the early *Contact Improvisation* work sessions was to coax, encourage, and engage this animal intelligence. Because "ones animal" was understood to be a deep aspect of the physical self, much of our efforts were put towards getting out of its way, letting go of one level of control and learning to trust in another. Steve was very concerned with safety and in a conscious and intuitive way cultivated a sense of care and respect for what unexpected energies might emerge. He did this through a slow, even, and gentle tone of voice; systematic, patient, and simple physical work; and by maintaining a high state of attentiveness in the room during sessions of open dancing.

In the text of "Fall After Newton" Steve says "In *Contact Improvisation* images are felt first by the body then experienced by the mind. "Images" is a word that has come to mean the ways in which ones physical experience organizes itself, to refer to that which the body feels as having form, though the mind often finds no verbal translation. This precedence of body experience first and mindful cognition second is an essential distinction between *Contact Improvisation* and other approaches to dance. The underlying premise of a *Contact Improvisation* duet is physical and the manifestation is open ended. There is no prescribed "image" for a dancer to use when entering a duet. This is a totally different kind of challenge than that of performing set choreography.

To learn *Contact Improvisation* is to learn how to pose a question. The question is: What happens when I focus my attention on the sensations of gravity, the earth, and my partner? The question is not asked by the mind, it is formulated in the body. To do this is a learned skill and requires a special effort. One needs to have an interest in ones physical experience and in the associations and images which come into the body when one moves. One needs to have a curiosity about ones unique patterns of response. The underlying practice requires an appetite for not knowing, and a willingness to experience disorientation. It is the energetic curiosity of this questioning that is the heartbeat of a *Contact Improvisation* duet.

In *Contact Improvisation* movement invention arises through interaction of the laws of physics with the living structure of the body. The specific movement invention itself does not necessarily hold the highest interest in observing a *Contact Improvisation* duet. *Contact Improvisation* constructs a formal setting in which to observe a persons individual process of responding spontaneously to surprising and unusual physical circumstances. This display is a deeply human expression of a dancers physical history, imagination, particular survival strategies, and body intelligence.

I feel concerned that a misunderstanding is growing in the dance worlds conception of *Contact Improvisation*. Some of the current expert teaching and practice of *Contact Improvisation* is focused on the physical skill and virtuosity that has developed through

25 years of practice. This interest in physical skills could be viewed as an evolution of the *Contact Improvisation* form or it could be viewed as a valuable divergence. It is remarkable how well this form has persisted and spread through the public domain and it is natural that each persons reasons and inspiration in dancing Contact would be somewhat different. On the other hand, I fear that with such a focus on physical skills some dancers new to Contact may never get a sense of the more subtle and essential questions at the heart of this body of work.

I feel the beauty, depth, inspiration, and direction of Steve Paxton's original vision when first bringing *Contact Improvisation* into the public eye is well worth remembering and continuing. This original vision is what I understand by the name *Contact Improvisation*.