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# Contact Improvisation

By Steve Paxton

The work is ongoing. It is still, in Johnston's phrase, about "any old people," but it is no longer focused on personal incidents within pedestrian forms. Personal incidents happen now in the context of a duet system that has been named Contact Improvisation.

Each party of the duet freely improvises with an aim to working along the easiest pathways available to their mutually moving masses. These pathways are best perceived when the muscular tone is lightly stretched to extend the limbs, although not to a degree that obscures the sensations of momentum and inertia. Within this flexible framework, the shape, speed, orientation, and personal details of the relationship are left to the dancers who, however, hold to the ideal of active, reflexive, harmonic, spontaneous, mutual forms. The ideal creates the attitude, which is manifest in the quality of energy-use.

This system is based in the senses of touch and balance. The partners in the duet touch each other a lot, and it is through touching that the information about each other's movement is transmitted. They touch the floor, and there is emphasis on constant awareness of gravity. They touch themselves, internally, and a concentration is maintained upon the whole body. Balance is not defined by stretching along the center columns of the body, as in traditional dancing, but by the body's relationship to that part which is a useful fulcrum, since in this work a body may as often be on head as feet and relative to the partner as often as to the floor.

The stuff seems to exist in the wrestling, jitterbug, Aikido, gymnastic, dance area. I feel we have invented nothing; rather, specified a way of activity that is exclusive of the *aims* of other duet forms.

As a social system, I view it comprising these formulas, where A = active, P = passive, d = demand, r = response:

Ad & Pr  
Ad & Ar  
Pd & Ar  
Pd & Pr  
Ar & Ar  
Ad & Ad

**Pd & Pr** tends to become **A & (A or P)** because the contact is broken or degenerated by double passivity. **Ad & Ar** tends to become **P & (Ar or Ad)** as a habitual way out of a glandular stymie when the aim remains contact. **Ad & Ad** can be a fascinating form. Trying to step around someone to their left when they are trying to pass you to your right can result in a reflexive series **Ad & Ad, Ad & Ad. . .**, and into **Pr & Pr, Pr & Pr, Ad & Ad, . . .**

All these forms naturally arise, and I have never bothered much with them in teaching, except to point out the profit reaped in avoiding them as set roles in the social-relations aspect of the improvisation and to indicate the stymie forms. Beginners tend to lapse into one form and stay for seconds on end. Neither person is *bound* to be active or passive for very long, and it is

desirable to have the intelligence and freedom to choose which mode is appropriate to the ongoing improvisation. The couple then moves from the social-glandular responses to a supra-social level.

Robert Rauschenberg included an illustrative form in his *Spring Training* (1965). It was simply ruled: two people; one walking, the other stopped on tiptoe. In learning this form, the partners must break through the concept that the other controls the situation to an appreciation that they each can determine both their own and the other's options. Stymies tend to be: (1) one walks—one stands, no changes; (2) rudimentary active-passive roles; (3) rudimentary gamesmanship—that is, making abrupt or surprising changes to confuse or tease the other person. Beyond is a 50/50 interface, and the variations in time and space are made cooperatively.

The same is true in the contact forms. One may lift the other (**Ad & Pr**). One may fall so the other must catch (**Pd & Ar**). One may attempt to lift and find the energy translated so S/He is lifted (**Ad & Ar**), etc. But this all has to do with intent, which should be minimal, and the sensing of intent, which should be maximal. The more the forms are understood, the more cooperation becomes the subject—an “it” defined by the balancing of the inertias, momentums, psychologies, spirits of the partners.

### TRAINING:

- |                                |                             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. attitude                    | 6. muscular development     |
| 2. sensing time                | (a) centering               |
| 3. orientation to space        | (b) stretching              |
| 4. orientation to partner      | (c) taking weight           |
| 5. expanding peripheral vision | (d) increasing joint action |

Attitude is the most important part of training, and work in this area continues long after the desirable attitude has been identified. It is usually discovered by noticing the attitudes of people with whom it is pleasant to improvise and comparing it with the attitudes of those with whom it is difficult.

Sensing time is peculiar in any dancing system; here time is nonmetric and of no particular duration. Videotape has been useful. (Steve Christiansen, of Coos Country TV, Bandon, Ore., has taped most of the concerts and some workouts since the initial work.) Here is where my sense of the connection of the endocrine system to time began to form—that is, how the body reacts to the situation and how the perceptions are changed by that response (and then, what actions result from the new perceptions). The hit of adrenalin when the body receives signals of danger is amazingly swift. If the dancer is aware that the signal has occurred because of a sudden lift and remains cool, the main effect of the hit is

a g r e a t s t r e t c h i n g o f t i m e.

When one becomes used to perceiving the distortion calmly, it is useful—especially if both partners enter into the perception and can recognize it in each other. This is the sort of thing meant by “sensing time”—coming to grips with the ways we sense time.

Orientation to space has to do with knowing where one is and, more importantly, where down is. Whirling around in a lift can cause the sensation of momentum to mask the awareness of gravity. Training consists of encouraging the improvisers to explore the edge of their disorientation in spinning, rolling, flinging the body about, stopping when that edge is reached and working a bit this side of it in every session.

Orientation to partner: touching from head to foot. But not with the hands; rather with everything else from head to foot. Leaning on each other, starting with the head (in this work the head is a unit of mass and a limb as well as sensing/mental apparatus); crawling and rolling

about on each other's lower legs, to train the legs to safely bear weight and to teach the layer-upon how to avoid putting weight on the side of the knee, ankle, etc. There are a number of exercises that clarify the situations that only two can win, similar to the *Spring Training* form. Taking weight is slowly developed over months, usually with matched partners. The physical spectrum is pretty broad, and—considering the differences in types of skeleton, psychological barriers (which tend to disappear, occasionally to be replaced with urgencies), and the differences in mass—it is unwise to match a 100-pound woman with a 180-pound man and expect a one-to-one situation. However, there are compensating factors, and such dances have been done by developed dancers.

Expanding peripheral vision is one of those things that happens the moment you become aware of its possibilities. Additionally, an exercise in which one puts his head in all positions in the space around the body, as fast as possible this side of disorientation, the eyes open but unfocused identifying the larger objects in the room, is useful. The muscular stuff is not too important for the accomplishing of the work; sometimes people achieve good results in the first or second session. It is an important safety factor, however; a soother, a healer, and the general toning-up of the circulatory system is useful for the rest of the life. And it is important if a lot of the work is to be done, as on a tour or a concert series. Doing the stuff strengthens, and additional work is done on the neck, wrists, shoulders, back. Centering relates to standing. Stretching is done both athletically and very slowly and delicately, depending on what is to be accomplished.

Taking weight has been dealt with. I'll add that there are places on the lighter bodies where the weight of a heavier person can be comfortably taken: around the hips and on the thighs. Sluffing weight is an important part of this and a useful technique for strong and less-strong alike. If one person is falling, the fraction of a second gained with a sluffing to the thigh or to the floor can make a big difference.

Increasing joint action: many people interested in improving their bodies these days have some information about Hatha Yoga, and this has been the main approach to the joints. Here, as in taking weight, slow development is found to be best.

These exercises are used both as warm-ups and, after the workout, as warm-downs, as in exercising horses.

I feel that publishing information about Contact Improvisation is permissible if information about the exercises accompanies the other material. There have been reports of injuries to dancers attempting to do similar material in dramatic contexts or for sport, and I think it important to stress the difference *attempting* the more active and precarious aspects of it, rather than simply having them occur as a result of following the paths of least effort and with the senses enlarged to cope with the possibilities. The physical forces can become extreme.

It is, however, a natural duet-play that is dealt with in Contact Improvisation, on evidence of fast learning and pleasurable continuation. Concert presentations of the work have tended to be relaxed, functionally clothed, concentrated, and unpredictable. In concerts I have arranged, the forms have been either a series of duets or a round robin, where only one person changes in each encounter.