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FOR MY MOTHER

AND IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER

2 Contact Improvisation's Origins and Influences

The Heritage of Early Modern Dance

Contact improvisation developed from the tradition of modern dance, part of the twentieth-century movement of modernism in art. This tradition engaged moral and philosophical issues concerning the primacy of the individual in society and the communication of ideas and emotion. Its formal preoccupations centered around the invention of new structures and techniques which could reveal contemporary visions of life.¹

In America, modern dance took on the character of continuing revolution, a re-creation of the American frontier standing counter to the European, aristocratic form of ballet.² During the 1930s, John Martin, one of the critical spokesmen for the new modern dance, proclaimed the revolutionary ideology of this undertaking: "It [the modern dance] has thrown aside everything that has gone before and started all over again from the beginning" (1968:6).³ Martin's claim that modern dance threw aside "everything" that had gone before and started all over again

1. For accounts of this early period of modern dance in America, see Kendall 1979; Shelton 1981; and Siegel 1979.

2. As dance historian Susan Manning (1987) has pointed out, modern dance was also associated with nationalism in Europe and America, taking on different characteristics in each location as artists sought to wed their new art to national visions (19–21).

3. From a different perspective, cultural historian Warren Susman (1984) has described this same period as "the age of culture and commitment" in American life, a time characterized by the quest to define and celebrate the culture of America while seeking important and stable forms, patterns, and symbols to which one might be passionately committed (185).

"from the beginning" echoes the enduring theme of the new frontier in American history.

Structural similarities between the early formation of modern dance in the '20s and '30s and the wave of experimental dance (including contact improvisation) in the '60s and '70s point to a repeating pattern. Dancers in both periods held ideologies of social consciousness and radicalism, often intentionally establishing connections between movement ideas and social concepts. Both early modern dance and contact improvisation were experimental movements, not formalized initially, consisting largely of a set of principles or ideas about moving which people explored. Like early modern dance, which was related to physical culture movements, Delsarte training, and various theatrical genres, early contact improvisation was related to a wide variety of activities: sports (especially gymnastics), aikido, body therapies, social dance, and modern dance techniques. Finally, dancers in both periods produced their work in marginal circumstances, trying to finance their dancing while maintaining a sense of artistic independence.

While modern dancers in the '20s and '30s struggled to present their work as a serious American art form, they simultaneously professionalized it, disassociating modern dance from both social dancing and entertainment dance (vaudeville, for example). As "art," the new dance did not draw large audiences, and the modern dance tradition consolidated as a spiritual, artistic endeavor performed because of love and dedication to the ideals of dance.

In addition, the development of group choreography necessitated the establishment of schools for training dancers and of modern dance companies for presenting performance. In the company, the individual choreographer was conceived of as the creative source of the work executed by the dancers, as the person who shaped and set the work of art until it was ready to be presented before an audience. The dancers were, in theory at least, dedicated to the individual choreographic and artistic vision of their director and united by a belief in the artistic and spiritual value of their activity.

Concomitantly, these choreographers considered improvisation part of the process of discovery of movement, a tool for choreography and not part of the finished product.⁴ While improvisation became the method

4. In practice, both choreographic contributions by dancers and extemporaneous movement in performance occurred, but they were largely acknowledged privately. For a rare public acknowledgment of such occurrences, see Paul Taylor's account of working with Martha Graham in *Private Domain* (1987:117–18).

for the teaching of creative, educational dance in colleges and recreational programs, the categories of education and art remained separate, implicitly associating improvisation with amateur self-expression. The only major exception to the absence of improvisation from the early American modern dance tradition was the teaching of Hanya Holm, expatriate student of the German dancer Mary Wigman. In Germany, modern dancers always considered improvisational practices to constitute part of their technical training; Holm continued teaching improvisation and composition in America, as did her students Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis. Yet even in this professional technique, improvisation has still been a part of the training method, not a vehicle for performance.

The heritage of early modern dance was maintained historically through institutions of teaching and performing, which became extensively developed during the '30s and '40s. Choreographers transmitted particular movements from dance techniques and the ethos and structures of modern dance practice. Many maintained schools or classes in New York and other cities. Some traveled around the country, performing and teaching. Former members of their companies and students who had trained in their schools staffed many of the dance programs in colleges and universities. During the period following World War II, any student of modern dance, as opposed to ballet, encountered the aesthetic philosophies and movement techniques of those who consolidated early modern dance: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, Lester Horton, Helen Tamiris, Hanya Holm, Katherine Dunham. Although students may have been unaware of the historical conditions under which modern dance developed, the teaching they experienced was imbued with images of individualism, pioneering innovation, and emotional expression realized in the physical technique and choreographic ideas of one or another of these pioneers.

Many of the dancers who were to participate in the experiments of the '60s studied this modern dance tradition. Many of them also experienced changes and new developments occurring in dance, changes which eventually affected ideas and techniques of dance in the '60s and the initiation of contact improvisation. Because continuities and transformations in concepts of dance and dancing during the postwar period occurred in the actual practice of dance, it is helpful to examine the work of people who were teaching and choreographing in the late '40s and throughout the '50s. The aesthetic philosophies of three teachers and choreographers exemplary of the period—Merce Cunningham, Anna

Halprin, and Erick Hawkins—illuminate some of the particular concepts being explored at the time which eventually figured prominently in the development of contact improvisation. The following discussion of these artists (all of whom were still active teachers and choreographers in 1990) selects the aspects of their work which highlight particular historical changes relevant to contact improvisation.

The Physical Reality of the Body: Merce Cunningham

Overt social and political commentary which made a statement or sent a message to the audience became much less prevalent for many artists after World War II. Merce Cunningham and other artists maintained a choreographic focus on movement which did not have a determined symbolic meaning or legibly communicative intent. These choreographers claimed to be making radical changes in modern dance, freeing it from the psychologism and social involvement of earlier dances and allowing the audience a greater freedom to interpret the dance. In an important shift of orientation, they tried to remove meaning from a symbolic or narrative content of dance and place it in the act of developing new movement techniques and/or new formal or structural methods for choreography.⁵

Merce Cunningham attempted to create a dance form in which any kind of movement could be called dance and in which the dance was not supposed to represent anything other than itself as a physical, human action.

“... I don't ever want a dancer to start thinking that a movement *means* something. That was what I really didn't like about working with Martha Graham—the idea that was always being given to you that a particular movement meant something specific. I thought that was nonsense. And, you know, I really think Martha felt it was, too. . . . It's always seemed to me that Martha's followers make

5. The source of these changes in part derives from the imperative of modern dance to be continually innovative. Because overt political action in social arenas within the general population diminished dramatically in the cold war atmosphere of the '50s, some artists, not surprisingly, also turned away from political drama and investigated the formal aspects of art devoid of explicit commentary. Also, the growth of new media and technology exerted an impact on artistic perception. The dances of Cunningham and choreographers such as Alwin Nikolais raised questions about the relationship of modern people to their changing technological environments.

her ideas much more rigid and specific than they really are with her. . . ." (Quoted in Tomkins 1965:246-47)

Cunningham also rejected models of modern dance composition based on traditional musical forms. "I never could stand the modern-dance idea of structure in terms of theme and variations," he is quoted as saying. "That sort of A-B-A business based on emotional or psychological meanings just seemed ridiculous to me" (Tomkins 1965:244). Instead, Cunningham presented his choreography as movement arrived at through the sole process of moving.

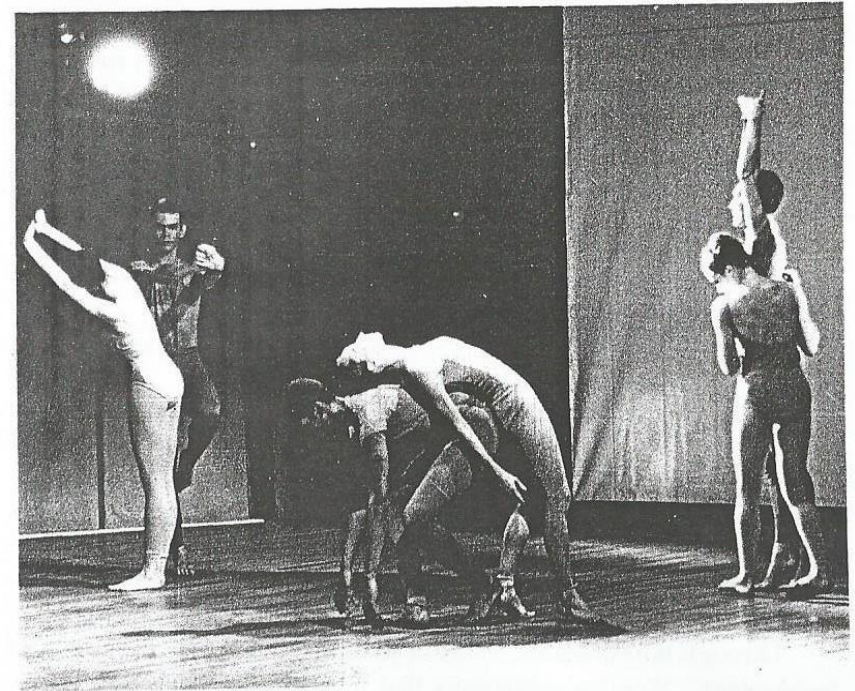
"There's no thinking involved in my choreography. I work alone for a couple of hours every morning in the studio. I just try things out. And my eye catches something in the mirror, or the body catches something that looks interesting; and then I work on that. . . . I don't work through images or ideas—I work through the body." (Tomkins 1965:246)

Cunningham sometimes employed chance procedures. The idea of using chance came from John Cage, who, influenced by his study of Zen Buddhism, adopted chance in his music as a means of "removing" himself "from the activities of the sounds" he made and avoiding musical habits. Thus, sound could emerge by a random process which Cage thought more in keeping with process in nature (1966:9-10). For Cunningham, Calvin Tomkins explains, chance "sometimes (but not always) enters the choreographic process as a means of determining the kinds of movement used, the order of the movements, the tempi, and other specific aspects of the dance; Cunningham uses it to arrive at certain decisions, which are then permanent" (1965:275).

As with most human endeavors, differences exist between what Cunningham actually did in his dances and his account of what he did.⁶ There is a remarkable continuity, however, in the way in which Cunningham explains and conceives of dancing and the way in which many contact improvisers understand their dancing.⁷ Neither Cunningham nor someone

6. In a fascinating interview by David Vaughan (Vaughan et al. 1987), seven former Cunningham dancers, including Steve Paxton, discuss the choreographer's work as they experienced it. They assert the narrative and imagistic content of Cunningham's dances, and they clearly explain his use of chance procedures.

7. For further discussion of Cunningham and his choreography and philosophy, see Cage 1966; Cunningham 1968, 1985; Johnston 1976; Klosty 1975; Jowitt 1988; and "Time to Walk in Space" 1968.



7. Three couples simultaneously engage in different activities during a moment in Merce Cunningham's "Variations V" (1965) creating a multifocused composition. This dance was made more complex by film projections on stage (by Stan VanDerBeek) which interspersed television images (by Nam June Paik) with images of the dancers, and by a sound score (by John Cage) generated by amplifying the sounds of the dancers' feet on the floor. As in many of Cunningham's works, the actions are a mixture of "dancerly" and "pedestrian," or tasklike, movements; at one point in this piece, Cunningham rode a bicycle around the stage. *From left to right*, the dancers are Sandra Neels, Albert Reid, Gus Solomons, Jr., Carolyn Brown, Barbara Dilley (Lloyd), and Peter Saul. Photo © 1965 by Peter Moore.

doing contact improvisation suggests choreography as a highly conceptual, conscious, intentional process. They describe it emerging from the act of moving, the body, not the mind, producing it. Also, in this view of dance, choreography happens to a greater degree by accident than as a result of human will.

Major differences exist between Cunningham's choreography and contact improvisation. The movement characteristics contrast markedly. Cunningham rejected improvisation, occasionally opting for indeterminacy (as in "Story" and "Field Dances" [1963]) but for the most part

maintaining the set nature of the choreographic product.⁸ He also followed the traditional social arrangement of the company led by the single choreographer, whereas contact improvisation has not. But Cunningham, by stripping dance of its intentionally symbolic or narrative content, by rejecting traditional methods of composition, and by focusing on the physical activity of moving as the content of the dance, suggested ways to alter the meaning of the dance.

Improvisation and the Theater of the Body: Anna Halprin

The work of San Francisco choreographer Anna Halprin provides a second example of experiments in modern dance which became widespread during the '60s and which influenced the development of contact improvisation. Halprin became interested in constructing improvisational structures for performance as an alternative to setting every movement beforehand. She saw improvisation as a means to both personal development and collaboration among dancers (Hartman 1977–78).⁹

Through improvisation, Halprin extended the modernist notion of "subjectivity." Whereas subjectivity had formerly applied to the choreographer's investigation, in improvisational work each dancer explored his or her own subjectivity. Halprin claimed she turned to improvisation in order to figure out "how one could move if you weren't Doris Humphrey and you weren't Martha Graham, but you were just Anna Halprin" (Halprin 1980).¹⁰

She also saw improvisation as a way of including the audience in the performance, overcoming the common division of participants at a performance into "specialists and gawkers." Because choreographers typically use improvisation only in rehearsal to help create a set product to be placed before an audience, Halprin thought, "the audience can only share in the product and that is why they become gawkers." On the other hand, "improvisation has the possibility of making process visible" to the

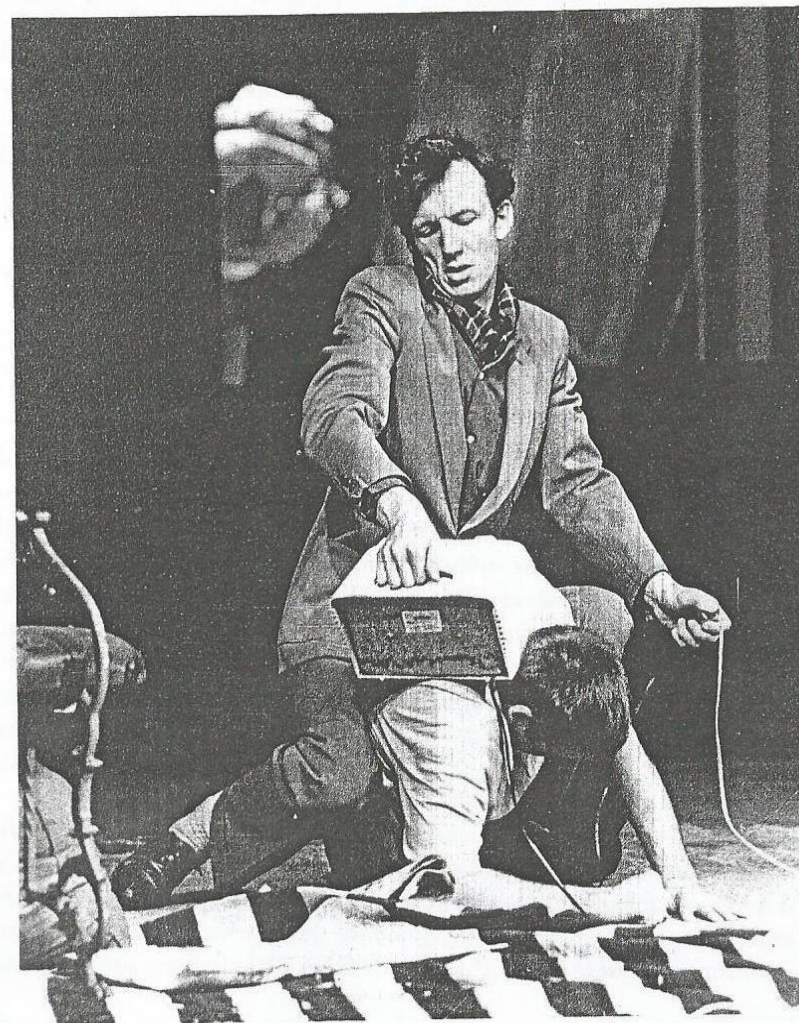
8. In indeterminate art, some events are allowed to occur by spontaneous accident or random choice, rather than as a result of active design. Indeterminacy could be categorized as a very particular kind of improvisation; only in this sense could one say that Cunningham ever used improvisation.

9. See also Halprin 1965 and 1967–68.

10. Interestingly, Halprin studied under Margaret H'Doubler, the dance educator who started the first college dance major in America at the University of Wisconsin in 1926 (Morrison 1973). Halprin credits H'Doubler with introducing her to improvisation (1965).

audience (Halprin 1980). Some of Halprin's works were scores which actually included the audience as participants in the dance.

Halprin sought to generate movement outside of traditional dance techniques. One source of movement derived from interactive improvi-



8. John Graham and A. A. Leah investigate their relationship using movement and a radio as a prop in Anna Halprin's "Apt. 6" (1965). In the '60s, Halprin's work was considered as much "theater" as "dance," but however she was categorized, her firm basis in movement as a source and motivation for human action remained. Photo by Warner Jepson. Courtesy of Anna Halprin.

sational structures: John LeFan, a student of Halprin's who later became a contact improviser, recalled one of her exercises called "Wonderworm," an improvisation for a large group of people giving and taking weight. Improvisation also became a way for expanding range of movement, rather than confining it to a codified vocabulary. For example, Halprin might instruct students to run "while moving the spine through any possible positions." Movement in nature fascinated Halprin, providing another source from which to derive different movement vocabulary, as did everyday, "pedestrian" movement. Through the particular combination of her teaching techniques and interests, Halprin identified improvisation with natural action and with everyday interaction. She also emphasized the direct, sensuous experience of movement, instructing students to experience "kinesthetic awareness" and sense the "body's changing dynamic configurations" (Forti 1974:29-31). Emphasis in training often lay on the experience of movement to a much greater degree than on the appearance.

Halprin has been an influential teacher on the West Coast, and many of her students participated in experimental dance and theater in the '60s, in California, New York, and elsewhere. Her work informed the investigation of improvisation in the '60s, the concern with ritual and body awareness, and the interest in therapeutic aspects of movement. The relationship of Halprin's work to contact improvisation is clear: it involved improvisation, lessening the control of the choreographer; it emphasized kinesthetic awareness and moving in a "natural" way; and it occurred outside of New York City. By combining improvisational methods with conceptions of a natural basis for movement, Halprin contributed to a concept of theater based on interaction and on the impulses of the body.

Science and Sensuality:

Erick Hawkins

Choreographer Erick Hawkins pursued dance ideas in the postwar period which exemplified changing concepts about movement, particularly those which concerned methods of training the body. He studied kinesiology, including the work of Mabel Ellsworth Todd ([1937] 1972) and Lulu Sweigard (1974), as well as writings in dance, philosophy, and religion, especially Zen Buddhism. From these studies, Hawkins developed a philosophy of movement training which emphasized sensations of mov-

ing combined with techniques seen to be based on scientific and philosophical principles.¹¹

Hawkins' conception of the body can be illustrated by comparing it structurally with views of the body in several other dance forms. For example, twentieth-century ballet proposes the body as an instrument which must be trained to conform to the classical movement vocabulary. Russian critic André Levinson ([1918], 1985) argued that the beauty of ballet lay in its artificiality, in the wonder of seeing a body accomplish feats so foreign to the experience of the audience. In contrast, modern dancers in the '30s and '40s subscribed to a more expressionistic view of the body, one in which internal feelings were realized in external movement. Although the body conformed to a vocabulary, that vocabulary was thought to have a basis in a natural, universal expression of human feeling.

Dancers in the postwar period began turning to another model of the body which was at once more abstract, or objective, and more phenomenological.¹² Hawkins was one of the most articulate proponents of this view, formulating what he called a "normative," or "generic," theory of dance movement by which one could train the body in basic, scientific principles of motion, applicable to everyday life as well as to dance. This basic understanding lay the groundwork for the creation of theatrical dance (Brown 1971-72).

In Hawkins' view, the body is both a natural instrument, subject to laws of gravity and motion, and the means for experiencing the world. Zen, claimed Hawkins, encouraged him to find a way of allowing movement to happen, of learning to dance without forcing the body. Consequently, his training emphasizes "kinesthetic awareness," the sensation of movement occurring in muscles and joints, so that the body might be used efficiently and without strain or stress. At the same time, the dancer should "think-feel," Hawkins' phrase for a state of "intellectual knowing with sensuous experiencing" (Brown 1971-72:11).

Again, as with all theories of the dance, execution does not always

11. Hawkins' training methods are described by Beverly Brown (1971-72). For other discussions of Hawkins, see Pennella 1978; Elias 1978; and Hawkins 1965.

12. My characterization of different bodies is consonant with Susan Foster's (1986) analysis of four paradigms of dance represented by George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Deborah Hay (a contemporary of Steve Paxton's). Foster suggests that the dancer's body in Balanchine's work is "a medium for displaying ideal forms," in Graham's is "a unified vehicle for expressing the self," in Cunningham's is "bones, muscles, ligaments, nerves, etc.," and in Hay's is "a fluid aggregate of cells" (42-43).



9. Soft fluidity and lightness characterize the dance "Here and Now With Watchers" performed in 1957 by Erick Hawkins and Barbara Tucker. The dance suggests no plot, yet evokes sensuality and nature through its movement, music, and poetic program notes. Yvonne Rainer, who would become one of Steve Paxton's colleagues, wrote, "I saw 'Here and Now With Watchers' and decided to become a dancer" (1974:4). Photo by A. John Geraci. Courtesy of the Erick Hawkins Dance Company.

match idea. Just as Cunningham did not practice "all movement" even though he claimed that every movement could be dance, so Hawkins built his theatrical dance into a very particular style, an immediately recognizable technique—soft, fluid, and light yet firmly connected to the ground.¹³ But an increasing number of dancers through the '60s, including people who eventually participated in contact improvisation, shared Hawkins' interest in efficient movement based on natural laws and in sensuous experiencing of movement as a primary focus for the dancer. The description of movement by contact improvisers contains the same concerns. By combining kinesiology with "felt" experience, Hawkins suggested a way to reconceive of dance technique and the sensation of dancing.

Social Dance in the '60s

Many of the dancers who were to create contact improvisation came of age in the late '50s and in the '60s. They participated in dance of the traditional modern schools as well as of the developing schools of choreographers like Cunningham, Halprin, and Hawkins. Both theatrical and social dance in this period distinctively manifested cultural and political changes. Existing techniques took on other meanings, new techniques were developed, and different attitudes emerged toward the activity of dancing.

In a conversation between choreographers Douglas Dunn and Trisha Brown, recorded in the late '70s, Dunn commented, "Before the sixties there was no consciousness of certain things as being dance." Brown added, "I think the 'Twist' helped a lot in the sixties." And Dunn replied, "Rock dancing was a bridge between your daily life, which was still unconscious perhaps, and part of your classroom dance life which was not making available that possibility [of all kinds of movement] . . ." (J. M. Brown 1979:170). Social dance exerted a powerful influence on conceptions of movement among many dancers and their audiences.

In the late '50s and early '60s in America, large numbers of people

13. These inconsistencies should not be seen as failures; rather, it seems impossible to develop a movement training without making selections. Otherwise, movement experience is so eclectic as to be without pattern, and the body never becomes constructed, physically or conceptually. Of course, differences of opinion exist as to the range of movement desirable and/or necessary to constitute a technique for dance training, but that leads to another discussion altogether.

danced to rock 'n' roll, a musical form based on rhythm and blues, jazz, and country music; the dancing itself drew heavily from African-American sources (for example, the jitterbug from the lindy, and the frug, the watusi, the mashed potato, and the funky chicken, from other black dance traditions).¹⁴

American blacks, and some whites, throughout American history had carried on the development of African-American dance and music forms, often adapted and synthesized with European forms. This dancing prominently included extensive use of shoulders, head, hips, and knees, often moving independently or in different directions at the same time. Emphasis tended to be on continuity of energy flow and strong rhythmic impulses, rather than on the specific positioning of body parts, and on improvisation both by individual dancers and by couples.

Although these characteristics had influenced social dance in America in general for over a hundred years, rock 'n' roll dance marked a major, widespread incorporation of these qualities into the mainstream of American dance, practiced by both blacks and whites. It was not simply by chance that this crossing of boundaries occurred during the development of the civil rights movement.

The media and American mass culture exerted major influence on rock 'n' roll music and dance forms. A national explosion of rock 'n' roll occurred in movie houses, where Bill Haley and the Comets' rendition of "Rock Around the Clock" in the film *Blackboard Jungle* caused "riots."¹⁵ But the exposure the music and dance received from television consolidated rock 'n' roll as a mass phenomenon: millions of people watched Elvis Presley's appearances (and later, those of the Beatles) on the "Ed Sullivan Show." Dick Clark's "American Bandstand," a daily television program in which Philadelphia teenagers danced to the latest hit records, provided teenagers a national forum for learning social dance in their own homes (see illustration 10).

"American Bandstand" was a particularly interesting phenomenon, a daily dance party placed in front of the television camera. The performers, ordinary high school students neither professionally trained nor specially selected, attended the show every day after school. The "regulars" became celebrities with whom the home viewers identified (Belz 1972:102-3). Dance in this case constituted both performance and be-

14. For an account of the history of vernacular dance, see Stearns and Stearns 1968.

15. According to Stearns and Stearns (1968:2), Haley's recording sold over three million copies, a large number at that time.

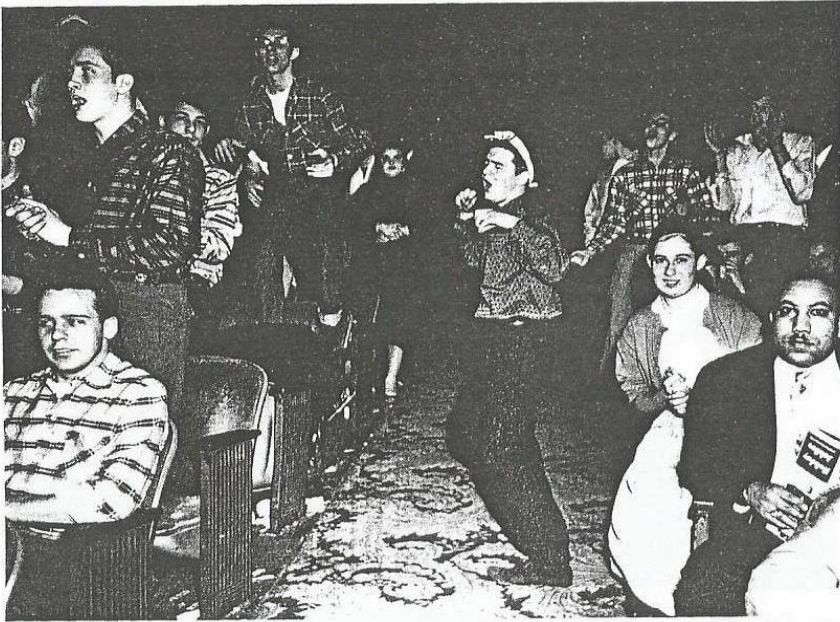


10. Two teenagers perform for their peers on the set of "American Bandstand." The Bettmann Archive.

havior; dancers were everyday people, as involved with themselves and the others with whom they danced as with an audience. The union of performance and behavior in "American Bandstand," never an explicit artistic canon for the television program, became an idea which later surfaced in experimental dance of the '60s and in contact improvisation.

Rock 'n' roll signaled other changes in dance style related to the influence of both black dance traditions and the mass media. People tended to dance in less predetermined, partnered forms so that participants were more closely connected to a room full of people than to a single person of the opposite sex. At the same time, greater individual interpretation of the movement forms was also becoming permissible. Music critic Carl Belz suggests:

Each dancer became absorbed in a world of intense, personal experience. Visually, a rock dance provided the counterpart of the way rock music was otherwise most typically experienced—that is, by transistor radios which allowed a massive audience to share the



11. People dancing in the seats and aisles of the Paramount Theatre in New York during a rock 'n' roll show in 1957 seem to have a range of reactions. But the young man in the center appears quite self-absorbed in dancing alone to the music. The UPI caption for this photo claimed that "some five thousand teenagers in sweaters and leather jackets blocked Times Square while waiting to get in. Today a large force of cops is on hand to prevent a repetition of yesterday's near-riot." UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

same experience, but to feel it individually. The bond among the dancers resided in the music they heard, but their physical separation showed that the bond was privately felt. In the panorama of a rock dance, one could not determine who was dancing with whom; rather everyone seemed to dance with everyone else. (1972:91)

Thus improvisation allowed for highly individualized dancing, and at the same time that dancers became more individualized, they participated in a collective experience. In situations like rock concerts and dances, no one needed to have a date, no one needed to be asked to dance, and, at least in theory, no one needed to have learned the right steps.

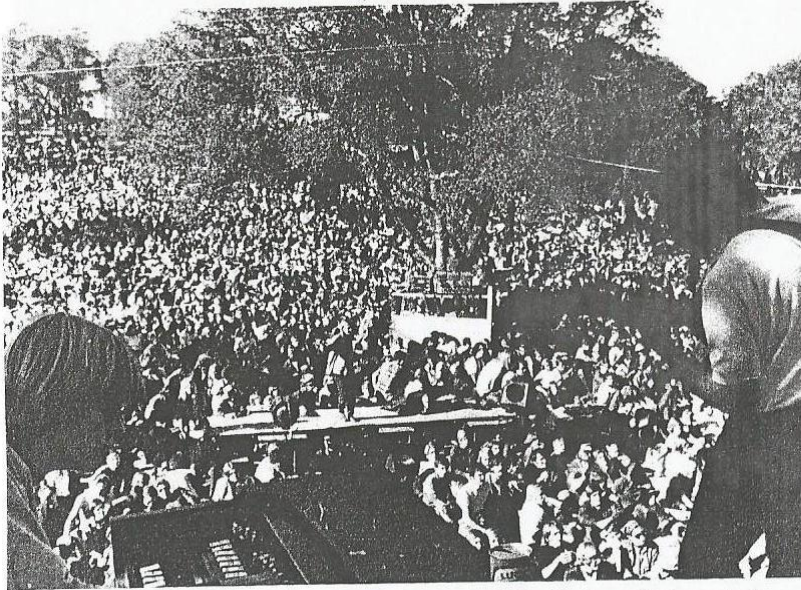
By the mid-'60s, people in some communities had carried improvisational flexibility in rock 'n' roll dancing to the point at which it was



12. The danger of (white) teenagers driven out of control by rock 'n' roll music and dance figured prominently in press coverage of the period. This 1959 photograph of a London "ballroom" carried a UPI caption which discussed attempts to ban the American film "Rock Around the Clock" because "riots resulting in considerable damage have occurred in movie houses." However, in this photograph, no one in the sedate crowd seems close to being riotous; the freely flowing, ongoing quality of the movement and the internal focus of the young man are the most evident features. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

acceptable for dancers simply to go out onto the dance floor, alone or with friends, and "get into" the music, moving in individual, idiosyncratic styles. But although the "steps" were not codified and most people felt they were being "free," certain structural and stylistic characteristics still typified the dancing. Dancers improvised, but did so within a specific movement range. They tended to move with a focus inward rather than outward to a partner or to the environment, absorbed by the music and the experience of moving. They frequently danced with a sense of freely sending energy in all directions, creating an impression of abandon and literally giving up control.

The movement qualities of rock dance created important components of the cultural environment of that time. Engaging in these ways of



13. The large crowd at a rock concert in Ione, California, in 1969 is typical of gatherings at outdoor music festivals in the '60s. The UPI caption states that "young nudes danced in a haze of marijuana smoke" but that "there were no reported incidents beyond monumental traffic jams." This comment links sex, drugs, and possible violence with rock music and dance. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

moving shaped peoples' feelings about their lives. The movement style seemed natural, contemporary, open, and not "uptight." Along with the rock music of the period, dancing both reinforced and crystalized an image of the self:¹⁶ independent yet communal, free, sensual, daring. This image of self would be central to contact improvisation.

The movement qualities of rock dancing were also associated with contemporary social movements and practices such as the civil rights movement, youth culture, and drug-taking, and with values such as rebellion, expressiveness, and individualism within a loving community of peers. Dancing encoded these ideas in a flexible and multilayered text, its kinesthetic and structural characteristics laden with social implications and associations. Depending on the circumstances and cultural back-

16. "In the last instance," write the editors of *The 60s Without Apology*, "it was the music and the attached dance forms that really created a new public sphere, even more than the various code violations in dress and speech" (Sayers et al. 1984:6).

grounds of the participants or observers, different aspects of the dancing would emerge as primary (see illustrations 14 and 15).¹⁷

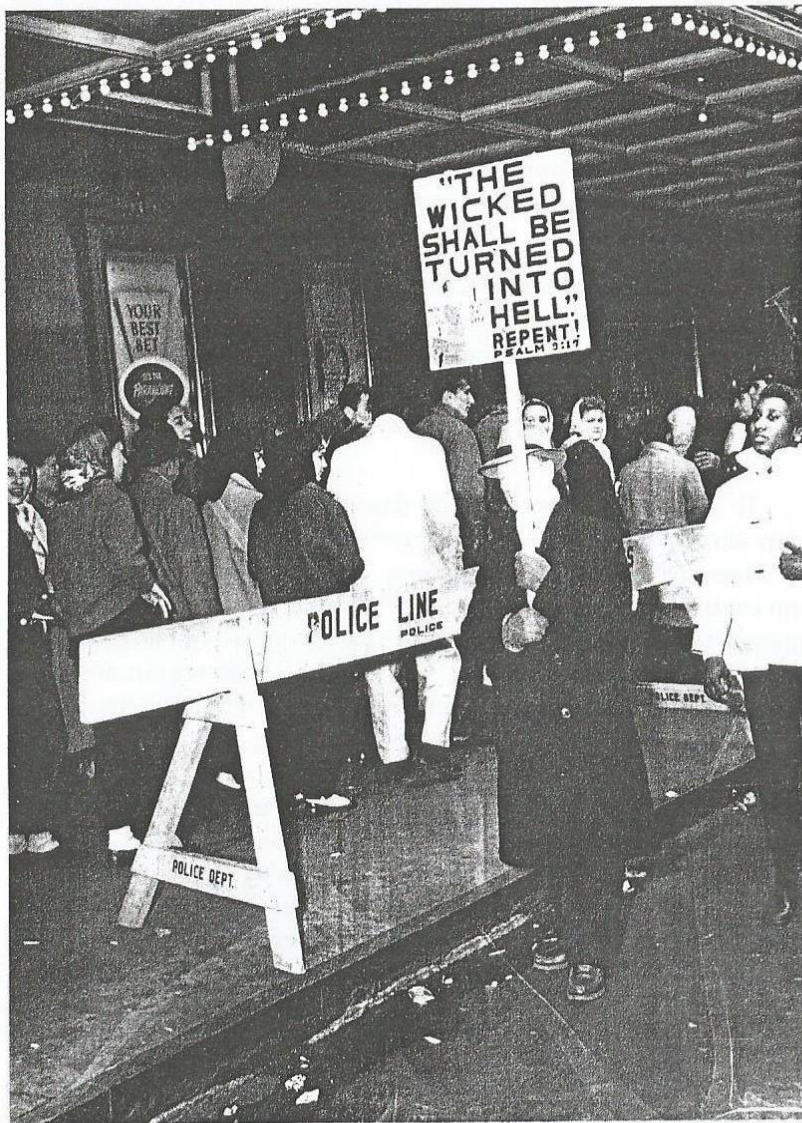
For example, the twist, made popular (ca. 1961) by black musician/composer Chubby Checker, was at once perceived by segments of the (white) American public as overly sexual because of its pelvic movements and open derivation from black culture, and antisocial because of the separation of one dancer from another. In 1962, one English journalist visiting New York wrote:

"I'm not easily shocked but the Twist shocked me . . . half Negroid, half Manhattan, and when you see it on its native heath, wholly frightening. . . . I can't believe that London will ever go to quite these extremes . . . the essence of the Twist, the curious perverted heart of it, is that you dance it alone." (Beverly Nichols quoted in Nik Cohn 1969:105)

To opponents of rock 'n' roll dancing, the twist appeared shockingly autoerotic. It blurred the distinction between male and female in an unhealthy way, promoted wildness, immorality, and social deviance, and contributed to a "generation gap." To those who danced the twist or enjoyed watching it, the movement engaged similar but more sanguine meanings—it was sexy, exciting, wild, youthful, and new. In any given social setting, meanings could shift. For instance, those who danced the twist in New York City's Peppermint Lounge experienced it as a symbol of the latest and the newest, an activity of belonging in a chic social circle. But for some teenagers, forbidden to do the dance in schools or community centers, it was an act of rebellion against repressive authority.

Dancers engaged in social action gave social significance to rock dancing throughout the '60s. For many members of the counterculture, the free-flowing, internally focused dancing evoked and accompanied the experience of giving up control and losing oneself in the drug experience. For more politically minded people, rock dance constituted a metaphor for political awareness. The extensive improvisation in rock dance enacted the rejection of explicit structures by New Left and feminist organizations. Being able to "do your own thing" on the dance floor

17. Sociologist and rock critic Simon Frith (1984) makes a similar point about the flexibility of music: "Music matters to 60s politics for its openness, its ambiguity. It was possible, for example, for some performers (the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead) to be a source of solidarity and enthusiasm for both the antiwar movement and the American soldiers in Vietnam" (67–68).



14. Dance can take on different meanings in different circumstances. Compare this photograph of Pentecostals picketing a rock 'n' roll show at the Paramount Theatre in New York in 1957 with illustration 15. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.



15. Teenagers perform rock 'n' roll dance in the main aisle of the Old South Church in Boston during a "contemporary service" in 1968. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.



16. Chubby Checker, *center*, who popularized the twist, dances in a 1960 publicity photo with Conway Twitty, *left*, and "American Bandstand" emcee, Dick Clark, *right*. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

enacted a commitment to individualism and egalitarian ideals frequently voiced in '60s politics by the New Left. The development of new music and dance forms by black artists continued an identification with and pride in black culture fostered in the civil rights and black liberation movements. And the lack of differentiation between male and female movement symbolized a rebellion against American gender roles.

As explicit political phenomena, the student movement, the civil rights and the black liberation movements, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement found only tenuous moments of alliance with each other. But dancing, a multivocal and flexible sphere of social activity, could on occasion alleviate and even transcend political differences, emphasizing the shared ethos of these movements for social change.

Experimental Dance and Theater in the '60s

The Judson Church Dance Theatre, a performance collective existing from 1961 to 1964, and the experimental or avant-garde modern dance

movement, of which it was the most publicized representative, also manifested and heralded social change. The temporary economic expansion experienced during the '60s created conditions which allowed for the simultaneous development of both formal and organizational possibilities in dance. Experimentation with new ideas could be realized in a period of relative economic ease; young dancers and students lived inexpensively in cities like New York and San Francisco on the money brought in by part-time work and helpful families.¹⁸ Greater numbers of dancers were able to band together to perform, and the number of aspiring choreographers increased dramatically. At the same time, choreographers found or created more flexible circumstances in which to perform.¹⁹ They began to present work in more informal (and inexpensive) settings—churches and loft spaces rather than concert halls.

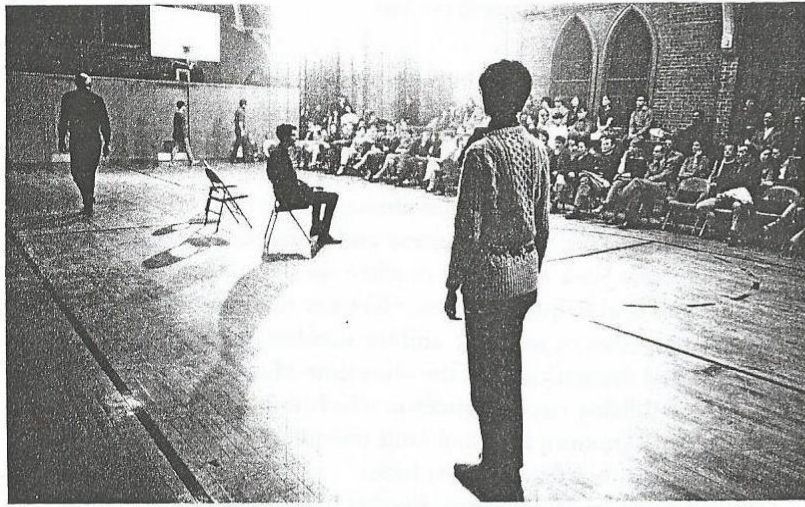
Choreographers and dancers, sharing in the general social milieu of incipient change and the specific representations of change in rock dance and late-'50s modern dance, began to investigate ways to increase spontaneity, informality, and collective action in the production and performance of dance. The organization of the Judson Church group itself differed significantly from most dance organizations in the 1950s. From 1962 to 1964, the group presented sixteen concerts at the Greenwich Village church at Washington Square. Anyone who wished to show a piece could come to a meeting at which the program was collectively decided upon. More than forty artists, predominately choreographers but also visual artists and musicians, showed their work during this period of time, work wideranging in aesthetic precepts but often characterized by experimentation with movement and new possibilities for structuring it. Dancers investigated "everyday" movement, used improvisational and indeterminate structures, and borrowed ideas from sports, visual art, and theater. They experimented with treating the body as a neutral enactor of movement rather than as an expressive, gendered personality.²⁰

In striking ways, the experimental theater dance was quite different

18. Yvonne Rainer, one of the most influential choreographers of her generation, estimates that during her first two years in New York City her mother sent her ten thousand dollars (1974:4).

19. This artistic trend had been initiated largely by visual artists in the '50s who began organizing "happenings" in loft and warehouse spaces in New York. For an account of this movement, see Kirby 1965.

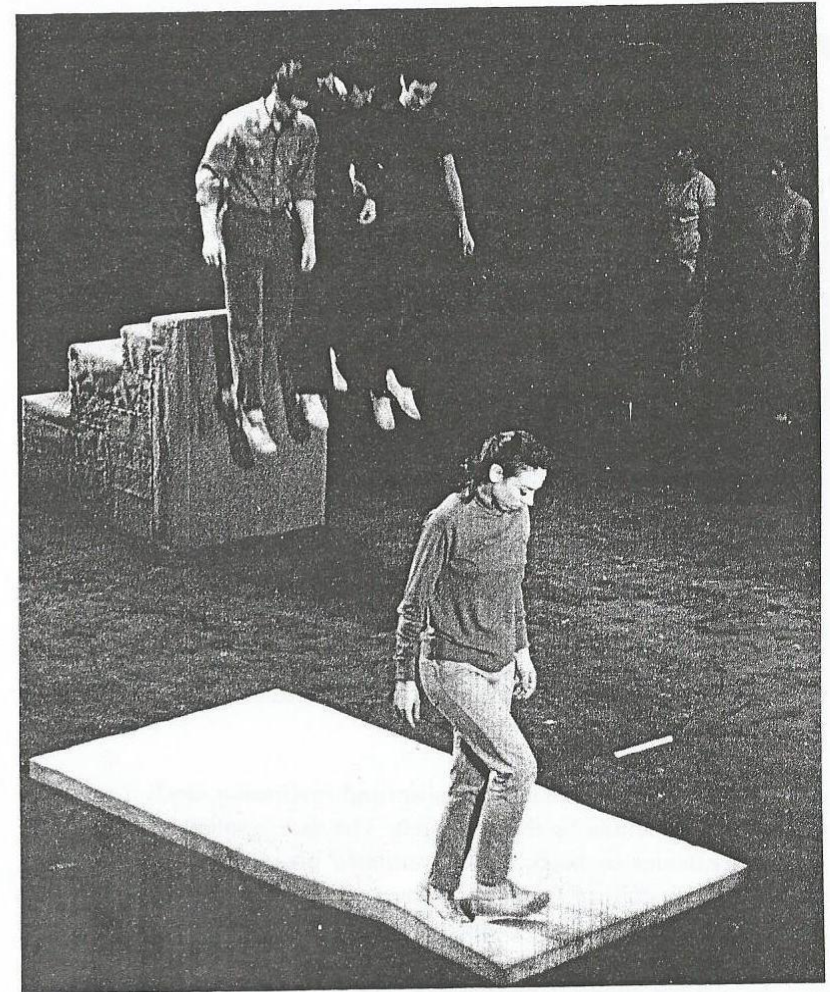
20. In *Democracy's Body* (1984), Sally Banes describes in detail the concerts presented from 1962 to 1964. Reviews of some of the Judson work by Jill Johnston, the *Village Voice* journalist who first made the Judson Church Dance Theatre famous, can be found in *Marmalade Me* (1971). Also see Jowitz 1988, chapter 8, Kirby 1969, and Tomkins 1980 for discussions of '60s theater dance.



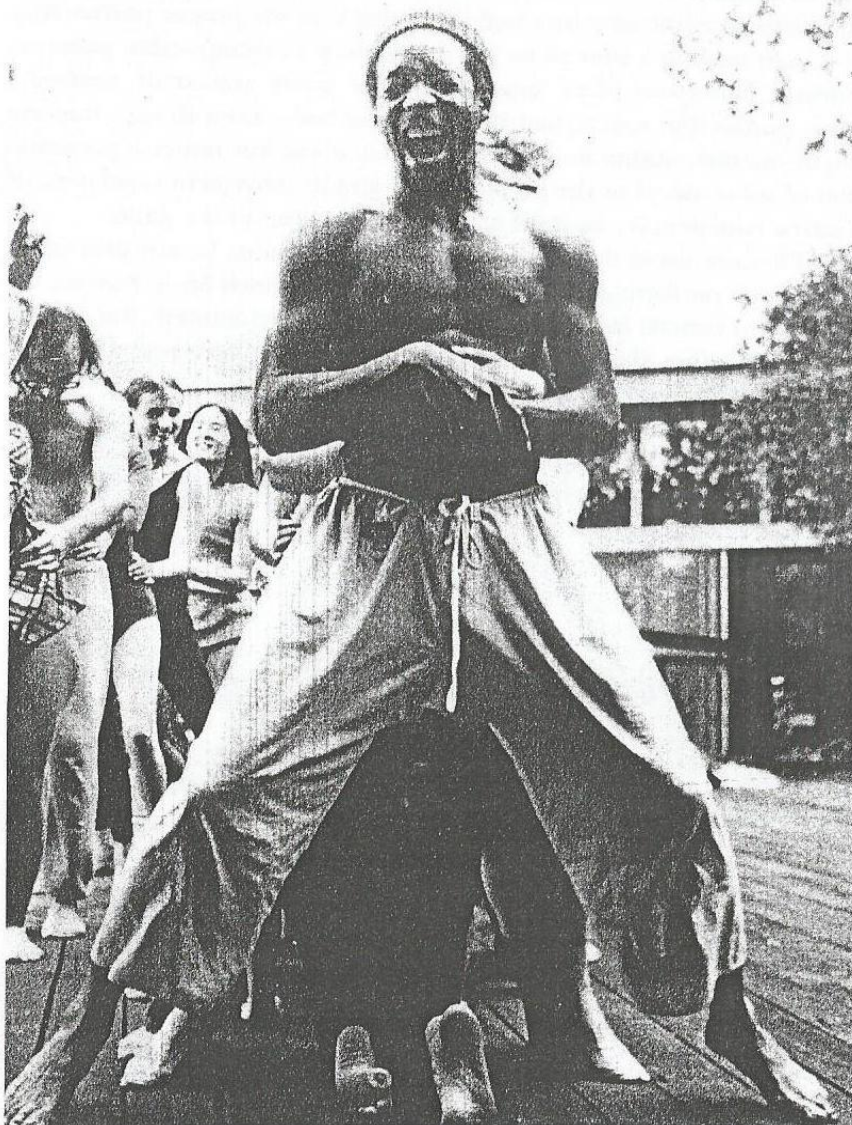
17. Critic Jill Johnston described Steve Paxton's "Satisfyin' Lover" (1968) as "thirty-two any old wonderful people . . . [walking] across the gymnasium in their any old clothes. The fat, the skinny, the medium, the slouched and slumped, the straight and tall . . . that's you and me in all our ordinary everyday who cares postural splendor." (1971: 137). See Banes 1977: 71-74 for Paxton's score for the dance. Photo © 1968 by Peter Moore.



18. For a 1970 "flag show" at Judson Church "protesting arrests of people purportedly 'desecrating' the American flag" in demonstrations against the Vietnam War, Yvonne Rainer was asked to present a piece. "To combine the flag and nudity seemed a double-barreled attack on repression and censorship," wrote Rainer, *center*, whose dancers tied flags around their necks, removed their clothes, and performed "Trio A" (1974: 171-172). Photo © 1970 by Peter Moore.



19. The tasklike investigation of pedestrian actions which characterized one aspect of '60s experimentation was a major concept in Yvonne Rainer's "The Mind Is a Muscle," performed in this photo by Steve Paxton, David Gordon, and Yvonne Rainer (beginning the section called "Stairs"), and Becky Arnold (finishing the section called "Mat"). Photo © 1968 by Peter Moore.



20. Some experimental dance in the '60s drew directly on social dance forms. Xavier Nash, a member of the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop (directed by Anna Halprin), here leads a group of students in a "black dance soul train." Courtesy of Anna Halprin.



21. Audience members join in social dance on stage, displaying a wide range of movement styles, in a piece called "Sing-Along Sun King" (1970) by Richard Bull. Courtesy of Richard Bull.

from the social dance of the same time period. An obvious distinction is that rock 'n' roll dance and music were large-scale social activities, while theater dance was confined to a relatively small number of people clustered most noticeably in New York and other metropolitan and university centers. Most theater dancers participated in social dance, but only a handful of social dancers performed theater dance.

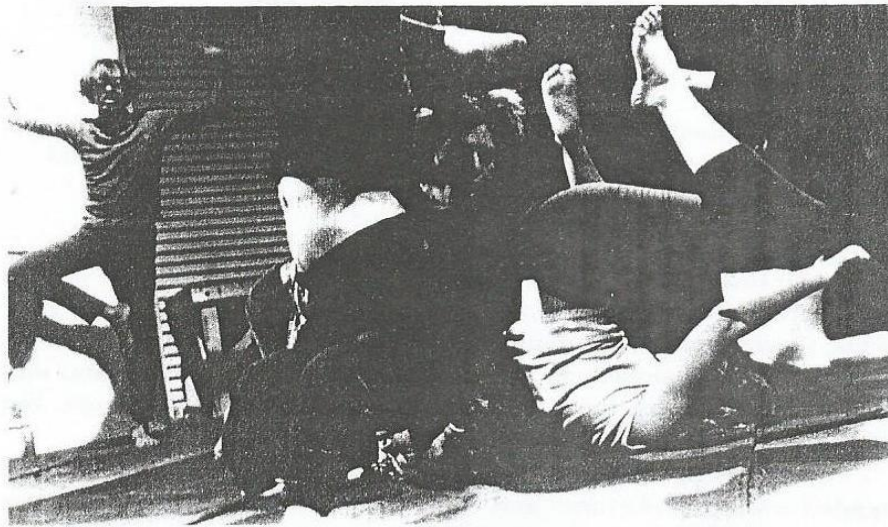
Contrasts in movement style also frequently existed. Rock dance tended toward exuberance and complex anarchy, while theater dance was often pedestrian and minimal. The familiar joke summarized the situation: in the early '60s, everyone would go to a dance concert to watch people stand around, and then afterwards everyone would go to a party and dance.

At the same time, a fusion of aesthetic and social ideas was occurring in theater dance. The aesthetic proposal that any movement could

be considered dance proved a powerful concept for younger dancers engaged by ideals of social equality and community. These ideals were embedded in the experience of social dance, which required no formal training and was hence seen as "democratic," but which was also clearly "dancing."

Thus, although the movement styles of experimental theater dance and social dance often differed, a curious thematic unity existed between them. Since the people doing both forms belonged to the same cultural milieu (although that of social dance was much larger and broader), the unity existing between the two dance genres came from a common atmosphere of experimentation and adventure. Both contained an implicit message that what was being done had political meanings and was making a statement.

Both social dance and theater dance of the '60s presented images of gender roles which opposed mainstream images but did so in different ways. Social dance was "oversexed" by public standards, its exuberance

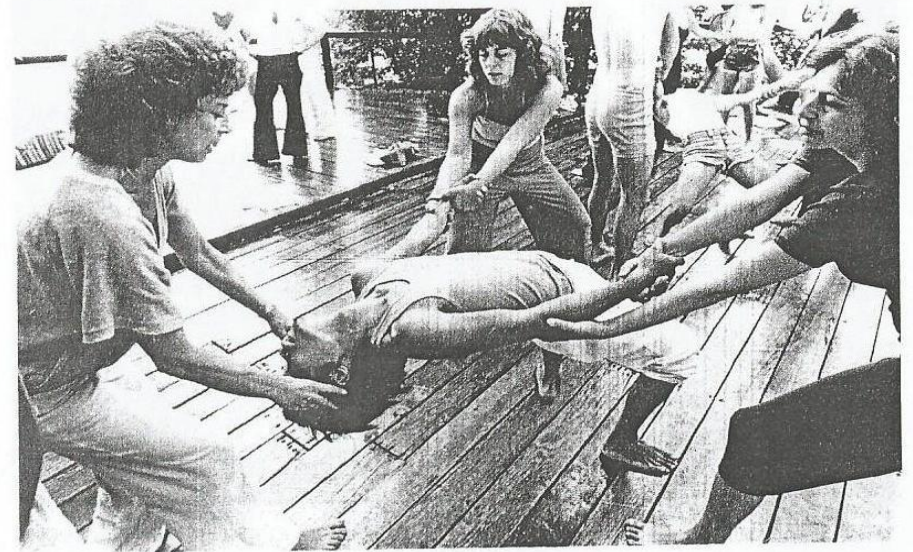


22. The Performance Group, directed by Richard Schechner, warms up for rehearsals of *Dionysus* in '69. Schechner explained to me that the warm-up consisted of exercises designed to "give and get energy and motion from each other." The man at the left performs a modified yoga pose ("We didn't know then it was yoga"), and those in the center do a shoulder stand taught to the group by Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. Also see Schechner 1973 (chapter 4). Courtesy of the Richard Schechner Papers, Princeton University Library.

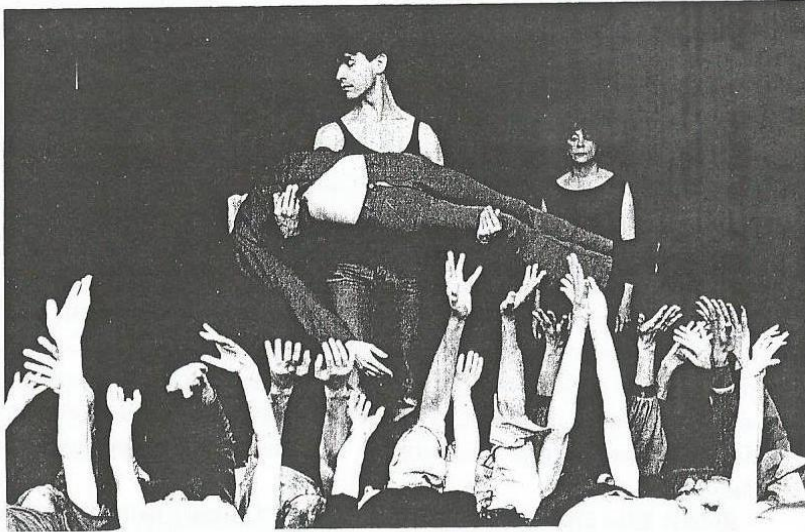
tied to "unnatural" sexual expression and its increasingly improvisational and individualistic structure tied to an attack on the proper partnership of a man leading a woman on the dance floor in recognizable patterns. Theater dance was often "undersexed" by public standards, androgynous, opposed to spectacular display of the body. Even though dancers might disrobe, nudity was seldom a sexual event but rather a presentation of some aspect of the physical body and its movement capacities, or a satiric commentary on itself or the subject matter of the dance.

The contrast of theatrical and social dance applies to only part of experimental performance, the part, in fact, with which Steve Paxton, the founder of contact improvisation, consciously allied himself. But Paxton and many other dancers also participated in and observed theatrical events that asserted the dramatic possibilities of the body.

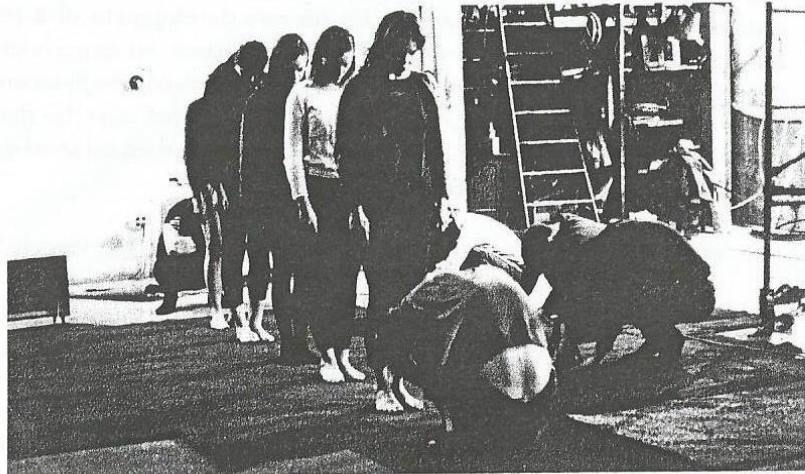
"Physical theater" is a shorthand term for what were actually many kinds of experiments with generating theater that did not center on the text, but rather took the body and action as a starting point. Throughout America during the '60s an extraordinary amount of theatrical produc-



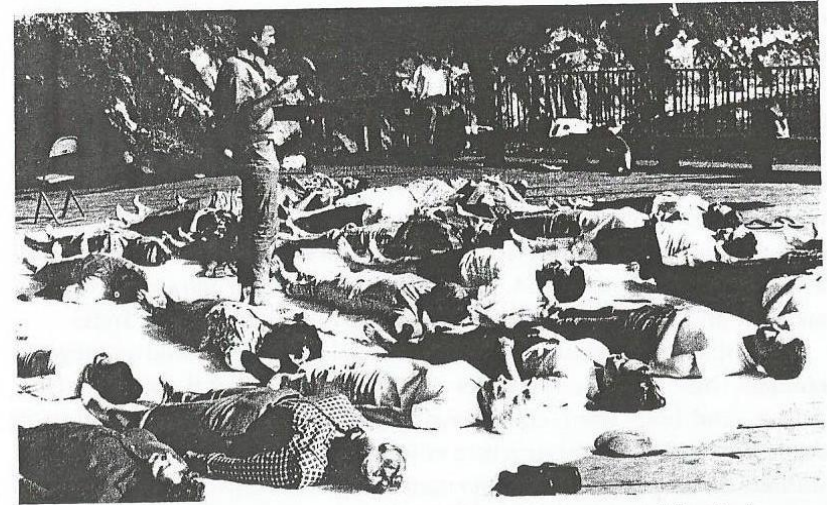
23. Anna Halprin, at left, assists students doing an "opening up" exercise with Jeffrey Chan at a workshop held on the outside deck of the Tamalpa Institute. For Halprin, "opening up" consisted of physical, mental, and emotional activity and interaction. Courtesy of Anna Halprin.



24. The choreographic nature of experimental theater is evident in this photograph of *Antigone* (1967) as performed by the Living Theatre (directed by Julian Beck and Judith Malina). The Living Theatre also experimented extensively with audience participation in plays like *Paradise Now* (1969), as did many theater groups at that time. Photo 1980 by Bernd Uhlig. Courtesy of Judith Malina.



25. The Performance Group preparing for the opening birth scene from *Dionysus in '69*, a performance that was as much like a dance as a play. Said Schechner, "The women stood, the men squatted, and everyone waited until the moment felt right to begin." Courtesy of the Richard Schechner Papers, Princeton University Library.



26. At the Esalen Institute, a center for gestalt psychology in California, instructor Bernard Gunther leads a class in body awareness in 1967. As in illustration 23, the class takes place out of doors, suggesting the assumed relationship between perception of body and a "natural" environment. UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

tion occurred which emphasized an intense physicality, and which also took up some of the same issues as theater dance of the period: improvisation, social commentary, and crossing boundaries between performer and audience. The exuberance of social dance was easily matched by the emphasis on action and even physical risk-taking by groups such as the Living Theatre, the Open Theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Bread and Puppet, and the Performance Group.²¹ A significant number of contact improvisers received training in this kind of theater, a training which would contribute to one of the variations on contact improvisation. → Finally, interest in the experience and "truth" of the body also emerged in nontheatrical settings, in therapeutic developments which burgeoned in the '60s. Concern for movement training which was both

21. For a summary account of '60s theater, see Richard Schechner's (1982) "Homeric Lists" of collectives and performances and his discussion of the theatrical avant-garde. Inspiration for this theater also came from Europe, for example, from the writings of Antonin Artaud (1958) and from the work of the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski (1968). Grotowski described his "poor theatre" as one which needed no props, music, sets, or text, but only the actor, "a man who works in public with his body, offering it publicly." The actor achieves a "secular holiness" by casting off his everyday mask and allowing the deepest revelations of his body to emerge (33).

scientifically based and sensuously felt was manifest in the body work of F. M. Alexander (1969), Irmgard Bartenieff (1980), Lulu Sweigard (1974), and Moshe Feldenkrais (1972), and was implicit in gestalt and sensory awareness training centers like Esalen and the encounter-group movement (Egan 1971). Performers and teachers attempted to apply this basically therapeutic work to movement training, just as Erick Hawkins had used kinesiological ideas in his dance technique classes. People also investigated body training from other cultures, particularly the martial arts of China, Korea, and Japan—Tai Chi Chuan, karate, judo, and aikido—and also various forms of yoga and meditation from India.

Contact improvisation, to a remarkable degree, would manage to connect these different activities of social and theatrical dance, performance, and body work, combining them into a single form. It did so in several ways. The social structure of its practice and performance did not initially divide people into performers and students, professional dancers and social dancers. Everyone involved went to jams, practiced the dance form, and showed the dance form (or could potentially show it). Also, contact improvisation combined the sensuality of social dance with an objective stance towards the physical capacities of the body, an idea developed by experimental theater dance, and with a belief in the inherent truth and drama of the body, an idea prominent in physical theater. The qualities of free-flowing movement and focus on the inner experience of moving, so characteristic of social dance, were joined with interest in “natural” movement training, central to studies of body therapies and martial arts. These qualities became central features of the movement experience of contact improvisation.

Steve Paxton

As I have tried to suggest, the development of contact improvisation can be traced to many different sources. Certainly, the social and cultural circumstances existing through the '60s and in the early '70s made the dance form possible. But contact improvisation also resulted from specific ideas and movement practices of the '60s filtered through the particular sensibilities and talents of Steve Paxton, the man who is credited as being the initiator of contact improvisation. His ideas and actions were central not only to the formation of contact improvisation but also to the course of its development.

Steve Paxton was a gymnast who began dancing in high school in

Tucson, Arizona. Coming to New York in 1958, he studied and worked with numerous people in dance, theater, and the visual arts. Paxton turned twenty-one in 1960. When asked in 1983 what he saw as the major concepts and people of the period which influenced and shaped his own work, Paxton, who joined Merce Cunningham's company in 1961, remembered being quite taken with Cunningham's assertion that any movement could be dance and that any *body* could be viewed in some way as “an aesthetic conveyor.” Paxton recalled feeling that in the late '50s, most dance companies seemed extremely uniform. The notion of physical beauty was very narrow, he thought, and in comparison, Cunningham's company appeared more varied. While Paxton felt Cunningham never went as far as he might have with his investigation of movement or of different physical types, his steps in that direction seemed significant to Paxton.

Robert Ellis Dunn, a musical associate of Cunningham's and a colleague of Cage's, taught a dance composition class which became famous as the meeting place and inspiration for many of the Judson Church choreographers, of which Paxton was one. Dunn had worked with Martha Graham and her musical director, Louis Horst, and wanted to devise a different way to teach composition which drew on the structures and philosophical ideas of experimental music. Paxton felt that Dunn's classes were “amazingly influential” for his own development of a performing aesthetic. Dunn often posed problems based on experiments occurring in music; Dunn's presentation of chance procedures pioneered in the work of John Cage provoked Paxton to search for ways “to make movement arise,” to derive it from a basis other than an established aesthetic or a traditionally trained body. Paxton explained:

When you're a dancer, you can spend many hours a day dancing, working on your technique and following the aesthetic rules of whatever dances you're in, but there's still all the rest of the time. What is your body doing? How does it get you uptown to the class? You've got your mind on the rehearsal or some piece you're building, but how do you manage to get uptown? How does it know to stick its hand in your pocket and get out the money and take you through the subway hassles? There's still an incredible reservoir of activity, quite separate from the technical activities that one is involved in as a dancer. To look at that was the aim. There was one other aim, which was to break down the hierarchy that seemed to

arise between people when one was a choreographer and one was a dancer. . . . It seemed to me like social forms very much determined the look of dances, or were a strong factor in the way they looked.

When asked what he meant by social forms determining the look of dances, Paxton said that the usual choreographic process, at least at that time, was "a dictatorship," a condition that affected not just the process of making dances but the aesthetic and style of dances as well. "You handed over your motive [for dancing] in those days to your teachers or choreographers," he explained. "Your motive, your movement sources were determined, controlled by them, and you struggled to be what they were." To Paxton, dancers often ended up looking like neither themselves nor their teachers, but like "watered down versions" of their teachers. Thus, Paxton said, "I began looking for ways to initiate a dance and cause movement to arise among people I was interested in seeing move (in other words, I was making choices all along), but without me being a figure whom they copied or who controlled them verbally or through suggestion."²²

In these brief comments, the beliefs held in common with Cunningham are evident. Paxton's reminiscence also makes clear the extent to which interest during the '50s in phenomenology and Zen, opposition to heroic events and traditionally symbolic vocabularies, and concern for the pedestrian, the everyday, the "here and now," were given a new political reading in the '60s.

Other artists in New York City influenced Paxton. He practiced theater improvisation with Eugene Lyons and watched the Living Theatre work. He established close artistic and personal friendships with some of Cunningham's associates, particularly Robert Rauschenberg, and with artists in Robert Dunn's class and at Judson Church. Yvonne Rainer, one of the most active and influential members of this latter group, performed often with Paxton and was sympathetic with his work. At a public lecture in 1984, Rainer talked about some of the themes common to their choreographic circle and about how she viewed Paxton's dances. She, like

22. In an interview with Sally Banes, Paxton expressed a similar interest in finding out how movement could "arise": "My feeling about making movement and subjecting it to chance processes was that one further step was needed, which was to arrive at movement by chance. That final choice, of making movement, always bothered my logic somehow. If you had the chance process, why couldn't it be chance all the way?" (Banes 1984:58).

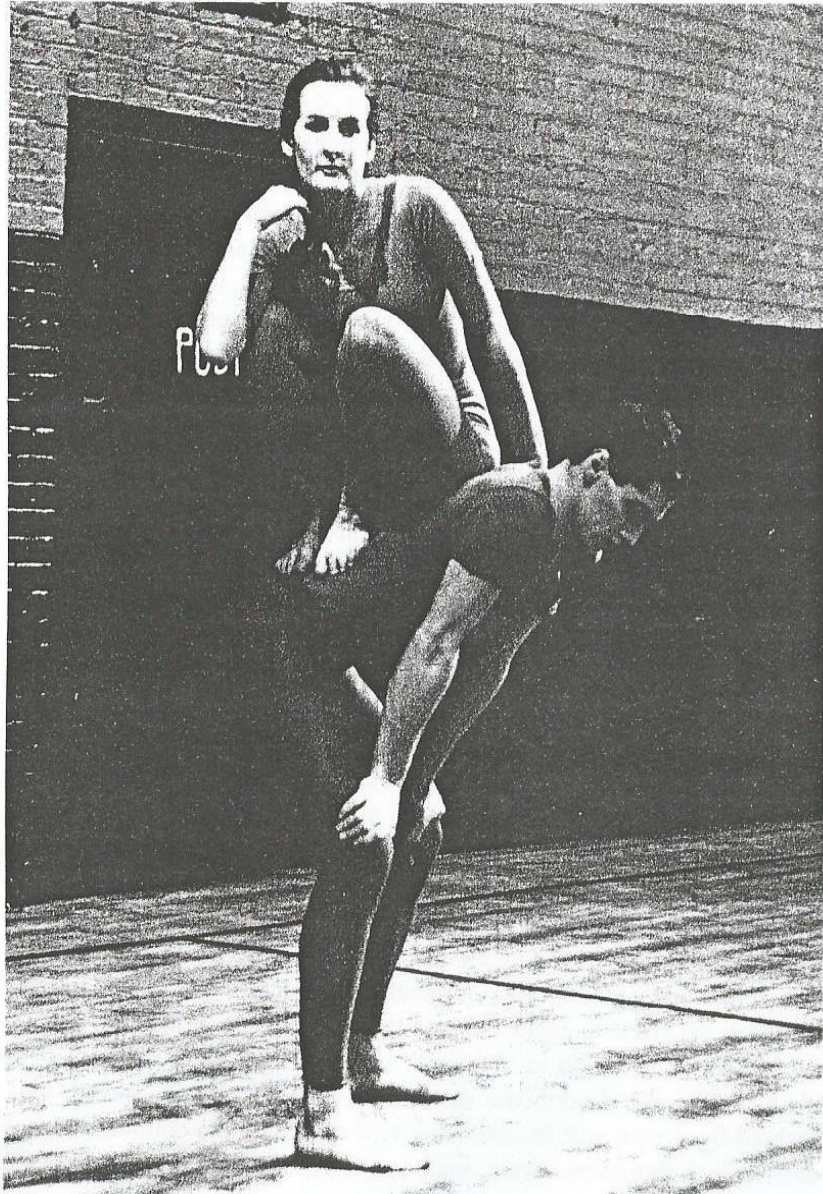
Paxton, stressed the possibilities opened up by the conceptions of art put forward by Marcel Duchamp and John Cage: the theme of the everyday, the role of chance and indeterminacy, and the acceptance of any material as a possible vehicle for art.

Rainer perceived two currents of political meaning in the "Cage-Duchamp movement." The first derived from Zen and involved an acceptance of everything that happened. The second involved an "antigenius, antimasterpiece" attitude. On the one hand, Rainer said, the Cage-Duchamp movement fostered acceptance of "a fated, totally randomized order," and on the other hand, the movement fostered resistance to the status quo and "the way in which social structures are naturalized and promulgated." These two currents articulated by Rainer would be joined in contact improvisation, which seemed to encompass both attitudes toward the significance of events: allow the dance to happen and recognize that anybody can dance.

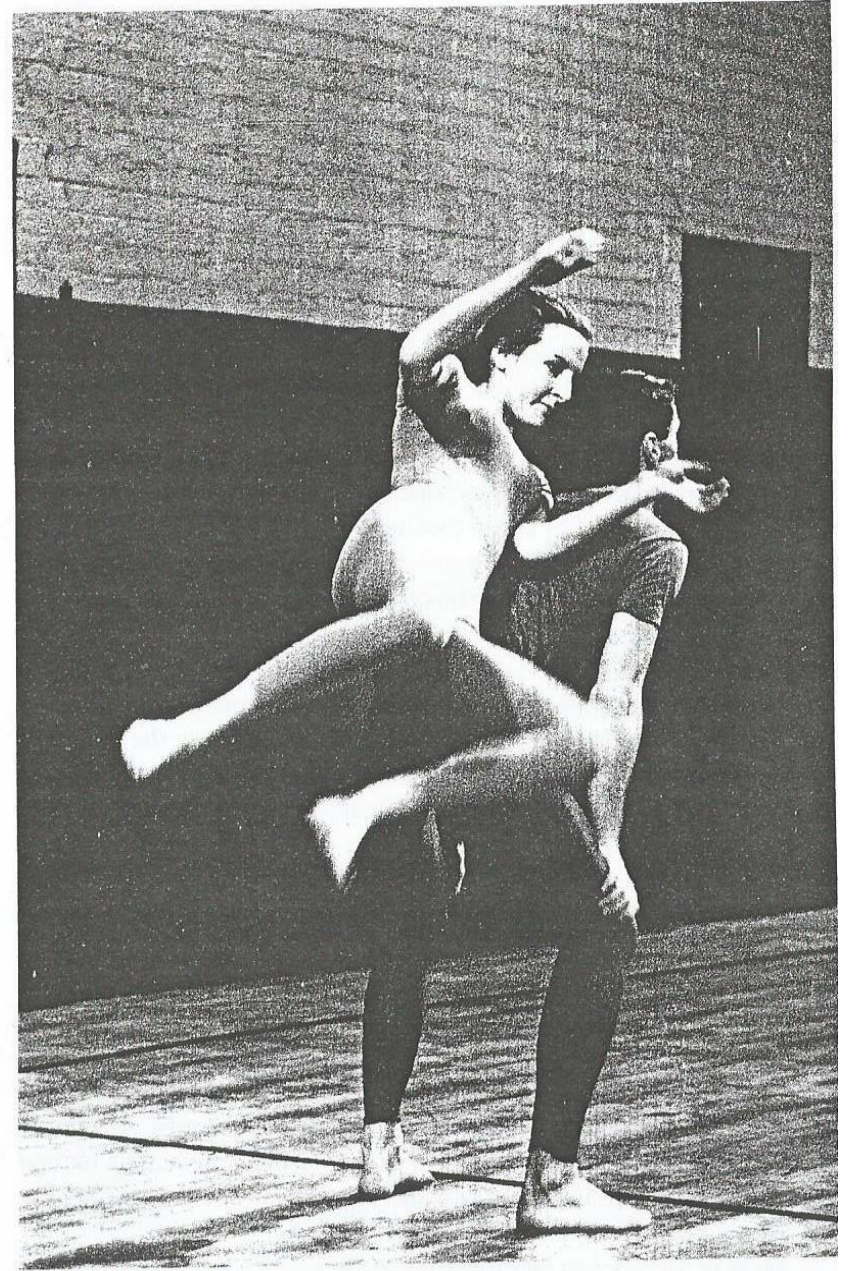
Rainer stressed the influence of feminist ideas on the transformation of dance in the period from the '50s through the '60s. She argued that the perceived sexual and social injustices existing in the culture at large in the '50s appeared in dance as well. If you wanted to be a choreographer and you were a woman, you became a modern dancer; for the more prestigious artistic role of ballet choreographer was reserved for men. Martha Graham, said Rainer, used to stress gender divisions between men and women in dancing; Graham also gave corrections in class that connected movement ability with sexuality ("if you accept yourself as a woman, your turnout"—outward leg rotation at the hip joint—"will increase").

Rainer saw a marked change in many dances of the early '60s in which men and women dancing did the same movements and were undifferentiated by gender. Rainer recalled Steve Paxton's dance "English," in which he tried to make everyone look more alike, even to the extent of using make-up to obliterate eyebrows and render features less distinct. She also described a dance by Trisha Brown, "Lightfall," performed by Brown and Paxton, who tried repeatedly to climb on and off each other's shoulders. Again, male and female differences were ignored (see illustrations 27 and 28).

Rainer admired Paxton's work, suggesting that Paxton's "stance as a dancer" was not really appreciated by many people at the time. He consistently refused to entertain the audience, she explained, often making dances which examined a narrowly defined area of movement and which



27 and 28. Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton in a sequence from Brown's "Light-fall" (1963). Rainer suggested that this piece "was an early version of contact improvisation, without the softness of the martial arts." Also see Banes 1984 (pp. 100–101) for another description of this dance. Photos © 1963 by Peter Moore.



were extremely minimal.²³ Rainer thought Paxton also sensed the implicit political statements behind movement: "He was very aware of the importance of social content and attempted to integrate that into his dancing."²⁴

Paxton was one of the dancers with whom Rainer made "Continuous Project Altered Daily," an evolving piece which incorporated the rehearsal process as part of the performance. "The whole world of spontaneous behavior on stage was opening up to us . . . we were interested in unforeseen happenings, effort, spontaneous response," Rainer recalled. That interest spurred the dancers in "Continuous Project" to begin to perform as a collective improvisational group, the Grand Union, which existed from 1970 to 1976.

For the six years that the collective performed in studios and at colleges, the Grand Union practiced open-ended improvisation which switched rapidly from surreal dramatic scenes to movement games to personal, conversational encounter, all conceived of as being within a context of extreme individual freedom for the performers (see illustration 29). As a member of this group, Paxton pursued his interests in finding out how improvisation could facilitate physical interaction and response and how it could allow people to "participate equally, without employing arbitrary social hierarchies in the group" (Paxton 1971:130). He was clearly concerned with developing new kinds of social organization for dance, noting in an article he wrote about the group:

Many social forms were used during the 1960's to accomplish dance. In ballet, the traditional courtly hierarchy continued. In modern dance (Graham, Limon, 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

23. Jill Johnston (1971) described Paxton in 1968 as taking "the most extreme liberated positions. He likes people for what they are and believes in their physicality (their shape and way of moving) for what it is" (97).

24. For descriptions of Paxton's dances and his commentary on choreography, see Banes 1984 and 1987, and a videotaped interview with Steve Paxton by Nancy Stark Smith ("Steve Paxton: The Judson Project") at Bennington College in 1983. Also see Johnston 1971 and Rainer 1974.



29. The Grand Union performed a free-associative, anarchic kind of improvisational dance and theater, using dialogue, props, costumes, and music. In this photograph taken at a 1974 concert at Judson Church, Douglas Dunn reclines against Barbara Dilly, *foreground*, Steve Paxton and Trisha Brown clutch each other, *left*, while David Gordon, *back center*, looks on from a distance and Nancy Lewis, *center*, dances by herself. Photo © 1975 by Johan Elbers.

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. Though this basic poverty of understanding on the audiences' part is a drag, unique and personalized forms have been emerging, such as those seen in the works of Robert Wilson, Judith Dunn, Barbara Lloyd, and the Grand Union. (1971:131)

During this same period of time, Paxton studied the Japanese martial art form aikido and began to experiment with the rolling, falling, and partnering skills of that movement technique (see illustration 30). He played with the opposite experiences of extreme stillness and extreme



30. Annie Leonard throws her partner during her black belt examination in aikido. When Steve Paxton studied this form, he was impressed by the reflexive knowledge of the body invoked in the training and by what seemed to him to be an aesthetic based on physical necessity. Photo © 1989 by Jan Watson.

imbalance; “I wanted to launch myself off the planet and see what happened without having to worry about the re-entry a few seconds later,” Paxton recalled. Moreover, Paxton was becoming interested in establishing a formal structure for improvisation rather than an anarchic one like that of the Grand Union, a structure (or antistructure) which Paxton thought was wonderful for “opening up all the possibilities” but which “eventually led to isolation of its members.”

In January of 1972, Paxton taught the structure for an improvisational solo he had made for himself to a class of male students at Oberlin College. Paxton and eleven students performed the dance called “Magnesium” for an audience in a large gymnasium. A videotape taken by Steve Christiansen shows ten minutes of what was a slightly longer dance.²⁵

The tape shows an event obviously set in the '60s (taken as a cultural period). The assorted loosely fitting pants and shirts and the long

25. My descriptions of videotapes here and in chapters 3 and 4 are based on a movement analysis carried out using the concepts of Rudolf Laban and of dance composition. See chapter 5 for further discussion and references.

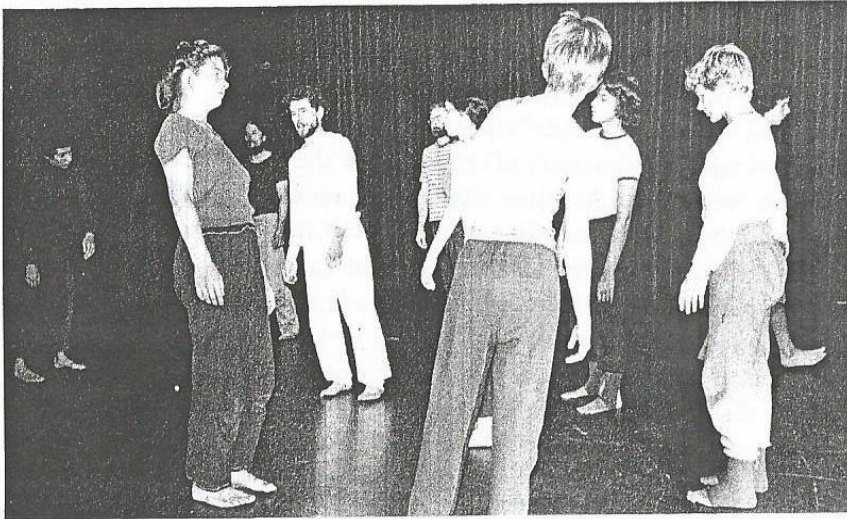
hair provide obvious signs, but the quality of movement—the loose, awkward, wild abandon, the earnest directness—are immediately apprehended kinesthetic markers of this historical moment. Performing on several wrestling mats, the men stagger about, crash into each other, fall, roll, and get up only to lurch around again. A lot of hand-clasping and pulling or dragging occurs, so that the dance looks like drunken wrestling at times. The performers have no orientation toward the audience, pursuing their falling with a tasklike attitude.

The dancers generally use their bodies as one piece, all parts simultaneously thrust off balance or thrown against another body or into the air. They keep an inner-directed focus fairly consistently; sometimes focus moves to another dancer. Lack of control characterizes most movement as the body weight is pulled or thrown off balance, and the dancers passively fall against each other or to the floor. The falls look sudden and wild, although it is also evident that no one is getting hurt because of the mat and because the performers exercise some active control in softening or rolling as they hit the floor.

The lurching continues at a rapid pace for five minutes, then it slows. Several performers start to lift one man; the rest join in lifting this single person and lowering him slowly, upside down, until his head touches the mat. This event, and an earlier arm tugging duet, are the only encounters caught by the camera which last longer than about ten seconds. The falling then resumes, until Paxton begins what he has referred to as the stand, or the small dance, and the others join him (see illustration 31). Standing apart, facing different directions, the vertical quiet of the slightly swaying bodies contrasts sharply with the frenetic, off-balance motion which preceded it. After several minutes of the stand, the dancers walk off and the audience, which has responded audibly with applause and laughter throughout the dance, applauds again.

Contact improvisers cite “Magnesium” as the “seminal work” of contact improvisation, before the form was named, although Paxton and others had been experimenting with this kind of movement for some time.²⁶ Thus, 1972 became the year marking the start of contact improvisation. Ironically, that same year saw the demise of the antiwar move-

26. The naming of contact improvisation and the conception of it as a particular dance experiment are part of what made it seem unique. Many others in dance had experimented with both weight and improvisation, and throughout the '60s, examples abound of both specific dancers and dance and theater groups doing something akin to “contact improvisation,” for example, Trisha Brown, Grand Union, Daniel Nagrin's Workgroup, Anna Halprin's San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, and so on.



31. In "the stand," a meditative exercise to develop sensitivity to one's own weight and balance, people experiment with minimizing muscular tension and then noticing the subtle shifts of weight which result. This exercise constituted the final section of "Magnesium" (1972), Steve Paxton's piece, and was included in many subsequent contact improvisation showings. Courtesy of Daniel Lepkoff.

ment and, in retrospect, signaled the fading of the '60s as a distinctive political era.

Although Steve Paxton is acknowledged as the founder and original guide of the contact improvisation movement, it soon expanded and spread out beyond his direct control. As the social and political movements of the '60s faded and as even the social dancing of the '60s began to wane, people practicing contact improvisation perpetuated this period's values and characteristics, weaving them together into a unique artistic and social experiment in modern dance.

3

"You Come. We'll Show You What We Do"

The Initial Development of Contact Improvisation

In June 1972, several months after the performance of "Magnesium," Paxton received a two thousand dollar grant from Change, Inc., to perform at the John Weber Gallery in New York City. While touring with the improvisational dance collective the Grand Union, Paxton had met a number of students. He decided to invite somewhere between fifteen and twenty of them to live and work together for two weeks in exchange for room and board. Paxton also invited Grand Union colleague Barbara Dille to join them, along with Mary Fulkerson, a teacher from the University of Rochester who had been working for some time with "release technique," a movement technique based on anatomical imagery and emphasizing softness and movement flow.¹ Among the students who would play a prominent role in the next few years were Nancy Stark Smith and Curt Siddall from Oberlin College, Danny Lepkoff and David Woodberry, both students of Mary Fulkerson's at the University of Rochester, and Nita Little, a Bennington College student. Steve Christiansen, a video artist who had wandered accidentally into the "Magnesium" performance at Oberlin and recorded it, also joined the group to videotape.

The group continued to work with Paxton's investigation of two ex-

1. Fulkerson's history includes sources described in the previous chapter and illustrates the variety of ways in which dance influence is transmitted. She studied with Anna Halprin in California, with Marsha Paludan (also a former student of Halprin's), who worked with a company of children and adults at the University of Kansas, and with Barbara Clark (1975), a New Mexico teacher who combined improvisation with kinesiological work based on Mabel Ellsworth Todd. Paludan later became involved in contact improvisation as well.

tremes of physical disorientation explored in "Magnesium," the one extreme of hurling oneself about and the other extreme of standing still and noticing the tiniest impulses of movement in the body (what Paxton had been calling the small dance, or the stand, for many years). Paxton called the dancing contact improvisation, not because he thought it was "the most poetic" name, but because, he said, "it accurately and objectively described what we were doing."

Most of the dancers stayed in a Chinatown loft where they worked on an Olympic-size wrestling mat, practicing aikido skills and testing the possibilities of two bodies moving together while staying in physical contact. They also worked outdoors in New York City parks. Nancy Stark Smith remembered that at the time it was "somewhat ambiguous" what they were going to do together. The work sessions merged with living, so that rehearsals never happened at set times but just went on "all day and all night" throughout the ten days of preparation. Smith's description immediately recalls themes of experimental dance—the interest in blurring distinctions between "art" and "life" and in replacing "goal-oriented" dance with communal experimentation.

We kind of lived in the midst of whatever it was that was beginning to take effect, because we spent so much of the day rolling around and being disoriented and touching each other and giving weight. . . . The fact that we weren't working towards anything, but just working, gave it a feeling of freedom to play with things. You weren't wondering whether you were doing it well or not, you were just doing it. . . . Everyone had a different way of doing it—the releasing people were very soft and light, very sensitive. The jocks, and I guess I was one of them, were out there rolling around and crashing about. . . . But we had to work together, or at least we did work together, even though people had favorite partners. . . . How to live together as a group and how to do this movement were equally new ideas to me.

The First Years

From the evidence provided by participants' descriptions and by videotape records of the dancing, contact improvisation at this time consisted primarily of duet encounters in which one or both partners would jump and fall, using the body of the other person as leverage to direct the fall. Sometimes, one person would climb on another or would gently guide

a partner's movement by lightly touching him or her. The jumping and falling show the influence of aikido skills, the lighter touching gives evidence of the body awareness work of "the small dance" and also of the influence of Mary Fulkerson and her students.²

The videotape "Chute" consists of edited segments from over twenty hours of tape documentary of rehearsal for the John Weber Gallery Concerts in New York City, June 1972. A commentary by Steve Paxton was added to the ten-minute video, which Steve Christiansen originally taped and which Christiansen, Lisa Nelson, and Paxton edited in 1978. Fourteen dancers appear, male and female students and colleagues of Paxton working for the first time with contact improvisation.

The dancing in this tape consists of duets. Like "Magnesium," virtually all the encounters take dancers from standing down to the floor, as the dancers experiment with falling. They seem to be testing out and extending possibilities, so that the duets last much longer than a single fall and a roll. In contrast with the almost continuous, impulsive tumbling of "Magnesium," dancers lean and balance on each other in a sustained, suspended manner, fall off and jump back onto each other, and trade the role of supporting or being supported several times in the course of a duet encounter. A greater sense of relationship between the dancers also appears, usually playful and tender, so that the action is less tasklike and more partner-oriented than in "Magnesium."

Again, the dancers often use the body in a whole piece, but sometimes parts of the body are articulated through successive movements—one body part moving after another—particularly in the rolling actions. Body parts are also used on the floor as support for the whole body—not only the torso and feet, as in "Magnesium," but also the shoulder and head, hips, and hands. Individual dancers also use the bodies of other dancers as supports, and moments of balance of one body on top of another occur. Some of the partnering interactions which eventually became part of the technique of the form appear: curving over a partner's back, catching a partner hip to hip, one person rolling perpendicularly over another on the floor ("surfing").

In "Chute" as in "Magnesium," the dancers concentrate on internally sensing movement rather than intentionally placing their bodies

2. Danny Lepkoff remembered that the Chinatown loft "was a massage hospital after every performance," but that he and the other Rochester people seldom became sore or bruised because they had learned how to fall softly. David Woodberry suggested that Fulkerson's releasing work had a strong effect on the subsequent development of contact improvisation.

in particular shapes or paths in space.) However, the spatial pathways through which the bodies fall and the movement qualities displayed differ somewhat from those in "Magnesium." Because bodies are actually being used as supports and as moving entities which can break or guide another body's fall, the patterns in space outlined by the body as it moves (what movement theoretician Rudolf Laban called the trace-forms of movement) often spiral through three dimensions. Contact improvisers talk about having to acquire a "spherical" sense of space, with which they attempt, as Paxton says in his commentary for this videotape, to transform "vertical momentum into horizontal travel."

As the dancers attempt to extend the duet encounter, movement phrases lengthen and the quality of movement extends beyond passive free falling. At times, dancers control the movement in order to guide the momentum of an encounter or keep it going. They also direct their movements with intentional strength or lightness in order to guide a fall. Consequently, in general, the dancing in "Chute" has a greater visual variety than in "Magnesium," with qualities of freely flowing energy and passive weight still predominating.

The preparation and performances at the John Weber Gallery gave the blueprint for concerts to come in the next few years. The performances themselves constituted a continuation of the rehearsals, lasting five hours each day; the audience came and stayed as long as desired. There were no special lighting effects, costumes, music, or sets, only the wrestling mat which was occasionally moved aside so that the dancers did not have to confine themselves to such a small space. The plans for performing (like the plans for rehearsing and plans for the future) remained indefinite.

At the same time, Paxton and some of the other dancers began to take steps to have the work continue. In Amherst, Massachusetts, at the end of the summer of 1972, Curt Siddall arranged a reunion of the Weber group, along with new people who had learned contact improvisation from original group members. Paxton, a relatively well-known dancer now because of his work with Cunningham, Judson Church, and the Grand Union, was often invited to perform at colleges, galleries, and in small performance spaces. He started taking some of the John Weber dancers with him to show what they had been working on together.

In January 1973, Little, Siddall, Smith, Paxton, and Karen Radler (a Bennington student), plus Steve Christiansen (the video artist who had also by this time begun to dance), toured the West Coast, calling their event "You come. We'll show you what we do," an apt expression of the

demonstrationlike, experimental character of these performance showings. The following summer, Paxton took Smith, Lepkoff, and Annette LaRoque, another Bennington student, to Rome, Italy, where, joined by Mary Fulkerson, David Woodberry, and several other dancers, they performed a series of concerts at the L'Attico Gallery.

The videotape entitled "Soft Pallet," shot by Steve Christiansen and edited by him and Lisa Nelson, excerpts sections from the L'Attico Gallery performances. The loose clothing worn by the dancers and the use of a mat are the same as in "Magnesium" and "Chute," but the dancers' conception of contact improvisation has changed during the intervening year. Dancers extend individual phrases of movement and connect one to the other, forming long, continuous sequences lasting thirty seconds or more. The duets often seem to take on an overall quality or theme. Paxton and Woodberry do a quick, high-energy dance moving suddenly together and apart. Fulkerson and Smith softly roll and balance, dancing fluidly and almost cradling each other. In another sequence, Paxton maneuvers and carries Lepkoff for some time; finally the balance is reversed and Lepkoff lifts Paxton.

The body articulation has become more extensive in this performance. Bodies twist and slither as if segmented into a number of parts as frequently as they move all in one piece, and the number of ways in which the dancers mutually support weight has increased. As a result of a greater technical ability to fall and to catch weight, the dancers take risks, launching themselves into space and moving through space in many different patterns, usually curved and spiraling in nature. In one astonishing moment in this improvisation, David Woodberry suddenly jumps high into the air, feet tucked under him in a squatting position. Paxton, standing to the side of Woodberry and apparently using his peripheral vision, thrusts his arm out and hooks Woodberry under his knees. Woodberry falls backwards, dangling completely upside-down from Paxton's arm, and Paxton slowly lowers him to the floor. The jump, catch, and fall happen in about two seconds' time.

The dancing in these sequences feels unrelenting in its concentration and energy, filled with jostling, pushing, and pulling as well as with gentler yielding, falling, and rolling.³ A certain amount of crashing and

3. To some extent, the high energy which characterizes the "Soft Pallet" videotape results from editing decisions. There were also many long, slow contact duets in this early dancing. Judging by the short excerpt from such a duet visible in this tape, the slow dancing shared with the faster duets an intense, absorbed, inward quality, the two dancers seeming completely engaged in their encounter and oblivious to anything around them.

sudden falling still exists, making the mat look necessary and giving some of this dancing a rough and precarious appearance. Yet other sections display a technical skill in extended periods of supporting and balancing and in sometimes breath-taking falling and rolling.

The videotape includes one solo. Annette LaRoque rolls and falls, shifting support from one body part to another using predominately freely flowing movement and passive weight, with occasional sudden changes of direction. She seems completely involved in the internal sensation of movement. The solo indicates the development of a certain style which characterizes contact improvisation, a movement style which derives from duet and group interaction but which can be extrapolated and performed by a dancer alone.

For these performances, the dancers constructed a mat, but they were finding it increasingly impractical to rely on having a mat for every performance. The subsequent absence of cushioning would affect the style of the dancing, encouraging the synthesis of the gymnastic/aikido skills with a more ongoing and controlled flow of movement and with lightness of touch.

Throughout this early period, according to Nancy Stark Smith, Paxton set a mood of "directness, simplicity, and lack of context," a mood "probably affected by the people he was working with but still largely attributable to him." In the early years, the contact improvisers often said that contact improvisation had no aesthetic. Of course, Smith added, when you look at it and compare it with other dance forms, you see that it does have a particular aesthetic.

But we were working from the inside of it, not working relative to anything else. The focus was on sensation, not particularly on style, on psychology, on aesthetics, on theater, on emotions. It was really pared down so that we could deepen our practice of the physical aspects of the work, so that we could find out what was possible instead of what looked nice.

Judging by comments from Smith and other dancers, participants took the focus on physical aspects as a neutral value, a part of natural law rather than an aesthetic (cultural) overlay.

Paxton expressed the same idea in a slightly different way, saying that contact improvisation excited him because it could be taught, at least initially, "so much faster than regular dance material where long, slow changes are required in the muscles to meet an aesthetic ideal." Quick-

ness in learning implied an accessibility absent from virtuoso modern dancing and ballet. In contact improvisation, according to Paxton, the aesthetic ideal might be said to be "a totally integrated body" (McDermott 1977:6).

Between the times of performance showings during these first two years, dancers living in different places might have communicated seldom or not at all. However, those individuals who wanted to continue investigating and practicing contact improvisation began to teach what they knew to other people in order to have partners with whom to dance. Contact improvisers take pride in the process of "passing the dance on," seeing this process as part of the "folk" nature of the form and as a demonstration of how the form itself requires that the dance be shared. A favorite analogy, told to me by many different people and attributed originally to Christina Svane, is that of contact improvisation to poker. "When a poker player goes to a new town and no one knows how to play, he has to teach someone in order to have a game."

Performances, Audiences, and New Dancers

From 1973 to 1975, the number of people doing contact improvisation increased rapidly. The students who had studied with Paxton at Oberlin



32. Steve Paxton and Nita Little. Photo © 1975 by Edmund Shea.

and Bennington graduated from college and began to resettle in other places; in particular, Curt Siddall, Nancy Stark Smith, and Nita Little, who all moved to California, taught and practiced contact improvisation regularly, always in informal settings. Alan Ptashek, who lived in a communal house with Nancy Stark Smith, said her classes were set up very casually, in large part just for the people in the house who constituted “three-quarters of her class.” Ptashek added, “One of the unique things to me in my orientation to contact was practicing it with the people I lived with. That described contact to me in a very immediate way.”

Performance opportunities at colleges, galleries, and experimental theaters continued to arise for the contact improvisers as a result of Paxton’s reputation, which drew invitations to perform, or, increasingly, because one of the other dancers would set up a showing or because an enthusiastic viewer wanted to arrange a performance. Lisa Nelson, who began performing contact improvisation in 1975, recalled that the concerts would “come together very quickly”; the people who were to participate would gather just before the concert or, sometimes, not until the concert began.

There was always someone new to dance with in a concert—that I remember clearly. . . . I remember a tremendous tension and excitement about encountering anybody, an anticipation, not know-



33. Nancy Stark Smith and Nita Little. Photo © 1976 by Uldis Ohaks.

ing 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 or kind of playful or combative.

The ambiance of unpredictability, of exhibiting behavior as a process rather than presenting something as a finished product, resided within a loose structure, the “round robin,” which participants adopted as a convention. A round robin starts with two people dancing. Then either one leaves the other to solo until joined by a new partner, or a third person interrupts the duet to form a new pair, and so on (sometimes three or more people dance together). Although it is never specified or required, those who have already danced often wait until most others have a turn before reentering the action.

Lisa Nelson’s description of early performances points to the dancers’ characteristic sense of being engaged in a process:

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 to dance 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 . . . there was a sense of danger in it, always.

The physical risks of falling while supporting or being supported by another person, depending on the other’s response as well as one’s own reflexes to help guide the fall, were at their greatest in these early years when the skills had not been completely developed and when people were constantly testing what might be done.

Through these performances or showings, an audience for contact improvisation began to develop. Students, dancers, and a more general population interested in experimental art and dance came to see the work. Some of the people who performed during those first three or four years gave descriptions of performances and of the responses by the

audience, which point to the peculiar way in which contact improvisation mingled dance with sport and art with socializing:

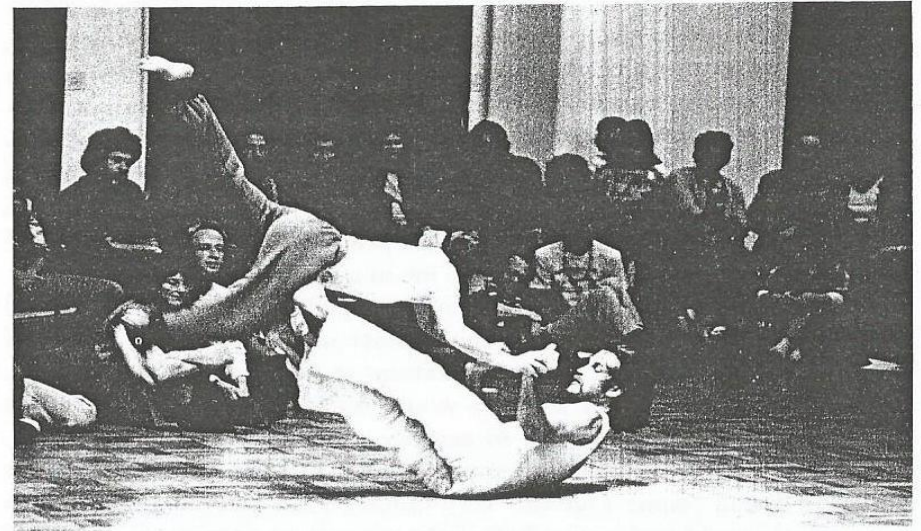
The performances were so exciting, and it thrilled me to be in them. . . . I always felt there was a gut-level response from the audience about what they were seeing. You understand that this is just my impression, but the response—the applause, the “oohs” and “aahs,” the laughter—was just a real physical response. It was almost like seeing a hot basketball game. (Danny Lepkoff)

The first tour of the West Coast was called “You come. We’ll show you what we do.” And that was really the attitude, a kind of welcoming of people to come in and see what we were up to. . . . Some of my favorite performances were in the early years, because people hadn’t seen anything like this before, and they weren’t jaded or glib about it. When they’d see somebody falling, they’d gasp because they weren’t used to seeing that be anything other than a terrible accident.

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 you 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)

I always remember the same response, basically. The space would get warmer and warmer throughout the performance, and when it was over, there would be a lot of dancing in the audience. People would be jumping all over one another. They would stick around afterwards and really want to start rolling around and want to jump on you. The feeling was of a real shared experience among performers and audience, a tremendous feeling of physical accessibility between performers and audience. People would embrace you after a performance to congratulate you, but then they’d hang on you, lean on you.

I think that looking at weight and seeing how long it was possible to touch somebody and not come away was very infectious.



34. Nancy Stark Smith and Curt Siddall. Photo © 1976 by Ted Pushinsky.

. . . It was a very, very impressive postperformance state, extremely energized. There was something that really unified everybody.
(Lisa Nelson)

A dynamic of interaction and sense of group participation characterized these early events, a dynamic generated by the movement style itself (athleticism, risk-taking, extensive touching), the novelty of the dance form, the informal nature of the performances, and the sensibility of the audiences who saw them. The ambiance of the initial years of contact improvisation (1972–76) contrasts with the ambiance ten years later, when the dynamic was clearly altered by changes in the dance form, the dancers, and the audience’s sensibility.

Among those who saw the early contact improvisation concerts were people who subsequently sought out places to learn how to do it. The geographical mobility of young people at the time, coupled with the experimental spirit which carried over from the ‘60s, made it possible for contact improvisation to begin spreading across the country. The concise nature of the dance form itself, the clear focus on maintaining physical contact within an improvisational structure of falling off balance, also made rapid transmission possible. Moreover, in contrast to all traditional

modern dance techniques, contact improvisation had no set vocabulary to learn; one could begin to practice it almost immediately, moving individually however one already moved.

Contact improvisation, because of its basis in physical notions of internally sensing weight and touch, rather than in a traditional aesthetic code, attracted both “dancers” and “nondancers.” It drew people oriented towards performing who sought a new approach and people oriented towards recreational and therapeutic participation. Both the performing and the rehearsing/teaching ambiance of contact improvisation encouraged a sense of commitment on the part of each individual to a collective endeavor and, at the same time, encouraged conceptions of that endeavor as totally unstructured beyond the dance form itself. Even the restrictions of the dance form, the actions of giving and taking weight in contact with one or more people, were generally characterized as being completely open-ended, allowing for individuality and freedom. While the definition of contact improvisation restricted it, helping to identify and clarify it, the thrust of its conceptualization, its ideology, characterized contact improvisation as open and “free,” an experiment in movement research continuing the work of the ’60s avant-garde.

Looking at just a few examples of individual experiences in those early years conveys a sense of the spirit and the process of developing contact improvisation. In 1972, Lois Welk and two of her college friends, Jill Becker and Donna Joseph (Chinabear), went to California. All three of them were interested in choreography and improvisation, and they formed a dance collective with some people they met in San Francisco, calling themselves the American Dance Asylum.

“You come. We’ll show you what we do” arrived at the Fireside Theater that January (1973), and Welk compared her experience of seeing contact improvisation for the first time with the first time she saw modern dance: “My head was in a spin—it was so incredibly exciting.” The “high physical level, the diving through space, were amazing,” she remembered. “I was so impressed by their courage to go out and improvise for three and a half hours, their confidence in their partners and the group, the sense of relaxation about it all.”

Welk and her friend Jill Becker talked to Paxton after the concert, who gave them permission to “crash” his class at Bennington College in Vermont.⁴ The two women hitchhiked to Vancouver from San Francisco,

4. Paxton’s Bennington class was taught outside of the regular curriculum. Paxton explained that, at the time, he was concerned about having genuinely serious students with

took the train across Canada, and camped out at Lisa Nelson’s house, which was “like Grand Central Station.” By July, Welk remembered, “I was out of my mind on contact improvisation.”

Getting permission to offer a workshop in the Dance Department at the State University of New York–Brockport, her alma mater, Welk began to teach twelve students. Most of them became frightened at what they perceived as the potential physical danger.⁵ By the end of the workshop, only two students remained, Arnie Zane, for whom this class was his first dance class,⁶ and Bill T. Jones. Within a year, Welk, Zane, and Jones had settled in Binghamton, New York, to work together as the American Dance Asylum, teaching and performing for the next six years and supporting themselves on part-time jobs, teaching, and small grants. Both Welk and Jones experimented to find ways to integrate contact improvisation with other kinds of set and improvisational choreography, and Welk continued to teach contact improvisation for several more years at Binghamton.

In another part of the country, Dena Davida, a dancer who had learned ballet and gymnastics as a child and modern dance in college, was studying in Minneapolis, and teaching creative dance to children in 1974. Davida, influenced by learning about Laban movement analysis and the Moshe Feldenkrais system of body therapy, was looking for a way of moving that was “easeful” and not about “pushing and forcing.” “Something felt wrong to me about traditional modern dance studies,” said Davida, “about locking my hips in place as a way of ‘centering’ my body. I decided dance wasn’t about struggling, but about moving.”

Davida studied with Mary Cerney, a Minneapolis dancer with the Nancy Hauser Dance Company who had gone to California and learned contact improvisation from Nita Little.⁷ When Cerney returned to Minneapolis, she began to teach contact improvisation. The “sensuality, weight, and flow” of contact improvisation made Davida feel like she had found

whom to work. Teaching the class outside of the curriculum required people to come to it out of interest and commitment, not because they were getting college credit.

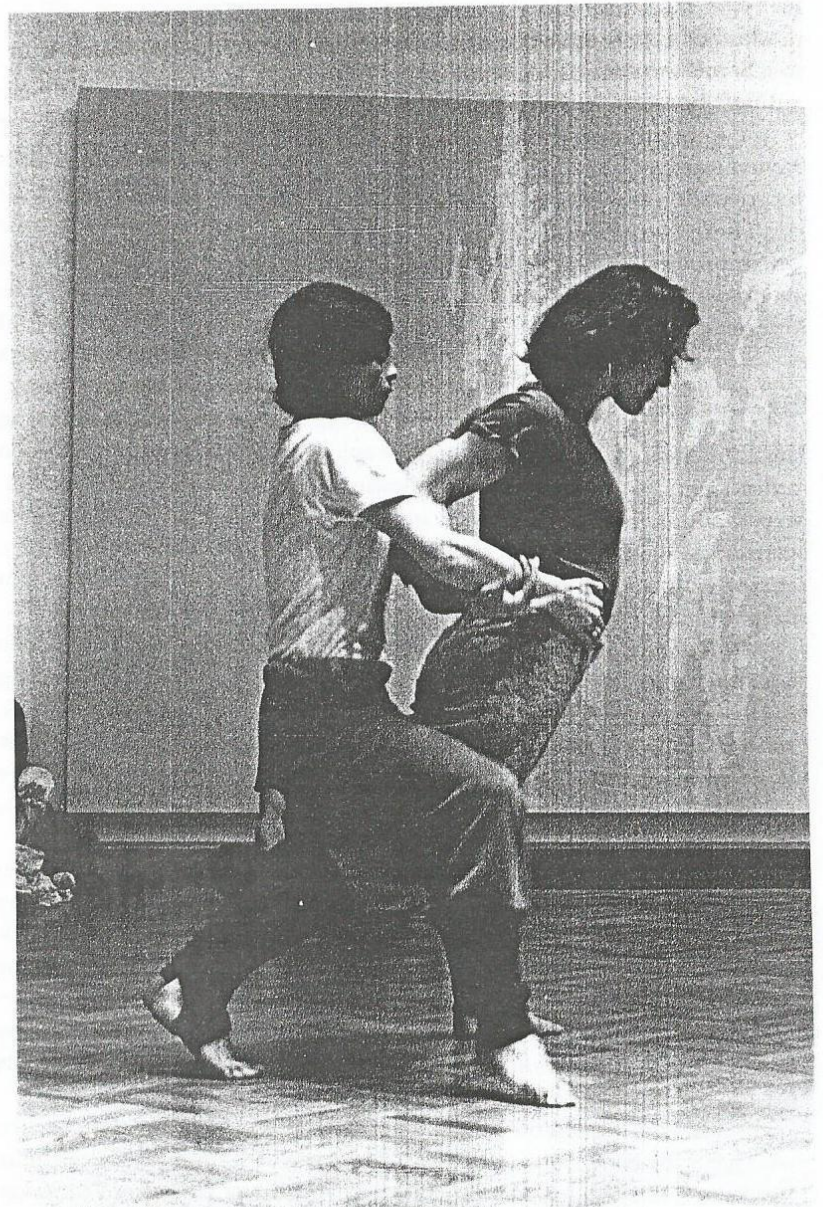
5. Contact improvisation as Welk had learned it from Paxton in the spring was taught largely by simply practicing it, with a few preparatory exercises for warming up.

6. Arnie Zane later wrote that he “had always loved the reality of social dancing and junior high school parties,” so he decided to try this workshop which was advertised as similar to social dance. “It was like taking acid; on a physical level, it was a total liberating experience in the early seventies” (in Kreemer 1987:113).

7. Little was one of the original Weber dancers. Contact improvisers in the ’70s were usually familiar with the “lineage” of their teachers, tracing ancestry back to one of the original John Weber dancers.



35. Steve Paxton, *above*, and Curt Siddall. Photo © 1976 by Uldis Ohaks.



36. Nancy Stark Smith and Nita Little. Photo © 1976 by Rhoda Elend.

her “own medium.” She remembered dancers considering the question of whether it was dance or not, of whether you wanted to watch it or not. Some were suspicious and saw contact improvisation as “mystical, cultlike” because, in fact, contact improvisers “did get pretty fanatical. People were infatuated with it, had to do it every day.” Three years later, Davida moved to Montreal, where she became one of the major contact improvisation teachers and performers in that city.

These two examples of individuals who became involved with contact improvisation are typical in their indication that the dance form struck a strong, responsive chord within a particular segment of the American population in the early '70s.

Organization and the *Contact Quarterly*

The 1973 West Coast Touring Group (Little, Smith, Siddall, Radler, and Paxton) met again in California in 1975 (minus Radler, plus David Woodberry), calling themselves ReUnion, a name evoking both past social experience of dancing together and the nature of the dancing itself. The dancers exchanged teaching ideas and discussed experiences in addition to dancing and performing together. This exchange, and others like it, contributed significantly to the evolution of contact improvisation into a recognizable dance form. With time, certain teaching exercises occurred repeatedly, becoming recognized and defined,⁸ and as more performances were given, more people identified both a movement style and a group of performers with the name contact improvisation.

The video camera also played a crucial role in developing contact improvisation. It provided constant feedback to dancers, showing them what the dancing that they were sensing internally looked like for an observer. Videotapes contributed to development of a shared movement vocabulary within an improvisational structure:

When we'd watch the videotapes and see some outrageous things happen, there was a tremendous appreciation for that. Or we'd see a duet where a very complex thing had gone down, and we would see how they'd worked themselves out of it or into it. Maybe, because you had seen something on tape, or live, you would try

8. Teaching techniques were also willingly shared with other teachers. Participants agree that there was and is no sense of possessiveness about techniques or even a need to identify who created them.

it. If it worked consistently, it might become vocabulary—certain throws, for example. These things were never taught as set “moves,” but they appeared regularly. (Nancy Stark Smith)

The video camera became a kind of teacher, a means by which new movement and shared aesthetic values could be implicitly delineated.

The passage of time also began to make the ReUnion people feel that they were engaged together in more than a temporary enterprise. By the time they met in 1975, they were beginning to talk about formalizing their organization. Some of the dancers said they were also provoked by a growing worry about dangerous teaching and a sense of possible fragmentation and loss of reputation resulting from the uncontrolled spread of contact improvisation.

From the beginning, Paxton had been extremely concerned with “controlling the teaching of going out of control” so that participants would be safe from injury. Now, teachers whom the contact improvisers had never heard of were giving classes in what was called contact improvisation, and reports were coming in of students with sprains, joint



37. Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. Photo © 1976 by Ted Pushinsky.



38. Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. Photo © 1976 by Ted Pushinsky.

injuries, and stitches. Moreover, when the name started appearing in contexts that the originators did not recognize, they were concerned about what kinds of activity were being called contact improvisation.

At this critical juncture, a key development and counterdevelopment occurred. William Schrievogel, a writer who called himself Koriel and who lived in the same house with some of the contact improvisers, attended a meeting of the ReUnion group. He offered to act as a kind of manager for contact improvisation, helping to organize activities and protect the name.

In a photocopied newsletter sent out in 1975 by the ReUnion group and their friends from San Francisco, Koriel summarized a series of proposals, including stipulations that members of "the Company" (the ReUnion group) communicate monthly through Koriel, that members give over 10 percent of their net earnings to "the Contact Fund," that a "recognized teacher/performer of contact improvisation must be OK'd by two or more of the members of the Company . . . and must give over 5% of contact net earnings to the Contact Fund," and that recognized teacher/performers would be expected to communicate regularly.

The newsletter also included a proposal from Nita Little. She suggested that the company adopt the name Contact Core. She also reported that a friend of hers involved in arts management had suggested they start using "© Steve Paxton et al." whenever they used the words "contact improvisation" in publicity statements (*Contact Newsletter* 1[April 1975]).

These organizational proposals were never acted upon. Ideologically, the proposals seemed "not in the spirit" of contact improvisation, said one dancer, and in practice, no one wanted to sign the letters of agreement to trademark the name, an act which would have required regularly reporting activities and "policing" new teachers. When Koriel complained that no one was giving him any work, Steve Paxton suggested to him that maybe "it's just a really small job."

In November 1975, Nancy Stark Smith published a second newsletter at Stinson Beach, California. In it, she reported that the "core group" had decided to disband as a committee and discontinue having a manager. "Instead of being policemen, we have decided to put our energies behind fostering communication between all those doing contact and encourage those less experienced to continue working out but hold off teaching for a while." She added, "It feels a lot better this way" (*Contact Newsletter* 1[November 1975]).

Thus the first-generation contact improvisers moved in the direction of consolidating into a dance company and a school but quickly chose to avoid establishing a formal organizational structure and becoming involved in directly regulating procedures. They maintained a strong sense that what they were doing was ad hoc and spontaneous, both as dance and as social interaction, establishing these qualities as the hallmark of the form. They indirectly and informally handled the need for controls over the teaching of the material by continuing the newsletter and, in 1976, turning it into a magazine, the *Contact Quarterly*.

In fact, from the beginning, Steve Paxton and other involved dancers used the newsletter to articulate their ideas to others and exercise informal leadership. Paxton in particular strongly argued that the original precepts of the form be explored fully before being expanded to include other ideas. For example, the first newsletter (April 1975) includes a letter from Paxton describing his classes and reaffirming his approach to the work, ending with a comment on his dissatisfaction with dancers wanting to move in other, more metaphysical, directions:

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*. . . . Personally I think we should guard our thoughts about auras and energyfields and E.S.P. until we can actually demonstrate *and* teach such matters. *Personally*, I've never seen anything occur which was abnormal, para-physical, or extra-sensory. Personally I think we underestimate the extent of the "real." (Emphasis in original)

In a later issue of the *Contact Newsletter* (1[Summer 1976]), Paxton argued in a slightly less vehement manner against the inclusion of overtly dramatic, emotional material in contact improvisation (a popular practice in California, where people with theater background were beginning to practice contact improvisation). Part of Paxton's emphasis on the physical as reality and on physics as a natural phenomenon undoubtedly derived from his effort to prevent contact from being turned into a vehicle for psychic investigations or encounter therapy. At the same time, Paxton's orientation towards the physical was not just oppositional; it constituted a positive commitment with roots in the philosophy of '60s experimental dance and in part of the modern dance tradition.

It seems clear that Steve Paxton, through his prestige as the movement's founder, his activity as a touring teacher and performer, and his regular commentaries in the newsletter, exerted a considerable influence on the development of contact improvisation in the first five years. As people expanded the newsletter into the *Contact Quarterly*, voices other than Paxton's became influential.

Furthermore, the establishment of the *Contact Quarterly* had a transforming impact on contact improvisation and made it unique among American dance techniques. Whereas the identities of other techniques were consolidated through the formation of dance companies led by founding choreographers and through the production of choreographed works, contact improvisation was consolidated through the spread of the practice of the dance form in collective groups and through the production of writing about it. During this period, at least, contact improvisation was an example of an alternative structure for organizing dance in America.

The *Contact Quarterly* successfully provided a vehicle for promoting and holding together a social network across the country and a forum for discussing people's activities and ideas about contact improvisation. It came to verify the existence of a movement; for the first time, as contact



39. David Woodberry, *above*, and Steve Paxton. Photo © 1976 by Uldis Ohaks.

improvisation spread to more people than could know each personally, participants began to talk about a "contact community" and a "contact network."

As pockets of contact improvisation activity sprang up across the country, local and regional versions and approaches to contact improvisation began to develop. New teachers and performers became leaders in their cities. Collectives organized to teach and explore the form. The contact jam became popular as a weekly local event in many places. Performing groups arose, some doing "pure" contact improvisation, others using the dance form in more dramatic or choreographic ways. Some of these groups were ad hoc, some of them incorporated as companies. New ideas were then disseminated through the *Contact Quarterly*. Because the dancing was based on principles of movement which were not attached to specific sequences or set technical exercises, a written vehicle could serve as a powerful educating and unifying force that augmented local developments.

By now, contact improvisation constituted a new dance form. It was new because it did not look like any other technique, and it was new because, despite Paxton's strong informal influence, it was not "Paxton technique." Unlike modern dance, which splintered into movement techniques with individuals' names attached (Graham, Humphrey-Weidman, Holm), contact improvisation remained a generic form.

4

Dance as "Art-Sport"

Continuing the Form

Although "Magnesium" heralded the beginning of contact improvisation, no one dance or event marked its coming of age. By the late '70s, however, groups all over the country were practicing the form, often in local variations influenced by the particular people involved. A videotape made by Stephen Petronio of a performance in Northampton, Massachusetts, in April of 1978, demonstrates the general qualities of contact improvisation at this time as well as indicating the particular contact style of the individual dancers: Andrew Harwood, Stephen Petegorsky, Lisa Nelson, Eleanor Huston, and Danny Lepkoff. In comparison with the videotapes from the early '70s, the dancing indicates a refinement and extension of technical skills accompanied by a slightly more presentational aesthetic. The videotape offers an image of contact improvisation six years after its inception.

A Performance in 1978

The performance at Northampton is a continuous dance, with choreographic conventions evident for entering the space. Sometimes dancers enter replicating the movement of someone already dancing. Sometimes, a solo dance serves as an entrance, a more complicated and extended version of the rolling, falling, shifting style seen in the solo in "Soft Pallet." Extensive trio work also occurs; the three men improvise an energetic sequence of jumping and tumbling over each other, interrupted by sudden stillnesses with one person at least partly balanced on another.