

# Contact Improvisation: Cultivating Instinct

Abstract- Drawing from first, second, and third person sources, I aim to provide both historical and embodied accounts of Contact Improvisation (CI), to use its most basic physical essence as a metaphor for its function as a social movement. The collation of information here- ranging from immediate to reflective- allows me to paint a picture at once more specific and more holistic than a research paper.



## An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding- Methods

**Participatory and Observational-** Attended classes and jams hosted by Contact Improv Toronto  
**Interview and Video Review-** Personal interview with Joseph Sengo, CI teacher; viewed past and current video artefacts  
**Literature Review-** Studied multiple written sources for background, including anthropological texts, magazine articles.  
*For detailed list of sources, see handout.*

Image: "Joseph Dumit Contact Improvisation". February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

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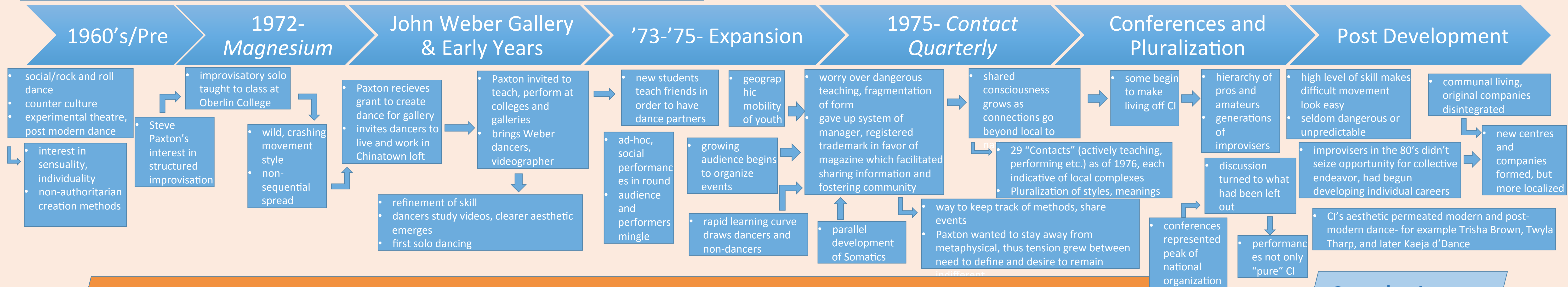
## Laban Movement Analysis

**Body**  
**Connectivity Patterns-** how is the whole body organized?  
 Head-Tail- spinal articulation, preparing for level change  
 Cross-Lateral- activating spiral lines across body.  
**Sequencing-** how does movement spread through the body?  
 Constant transmission of force, spread sequentially or successively.

**Shape**  
**Basic Forms**  
 Screw (twisted, spiral) forms fit partners together like lego.  
**Modes of Change-** how is shape change motivated?  
 Motivation comes from the environment- the floor and partner(s). Thus, mode of change is directional (bridging to the environment), or carving (adapting with the environment).

**Effort**  
**What is the dynamic quality of the movement?**  
 Free, allows for soft and responsive bodies, external stimuli and internal sensations operate in reciprocal exchange.  
**Flow Effort- continuity.**  
 self and intention of moving.  
 Strong, allows direct tactile communication with partner.  
**Time Effort- inner attitude towards time.**  
 Immediacy makes for sustained yet sudden effort. Urgency of the now  
 responded to with patient movement that unfolds indefinitely.  
**Space Effort- the way attention is given.**  
 Indirect, flexible attention and fluidity of motivation.

**Space**  
**Kinesphere-** what volume of space is taken up?  
 Kinesphere shared by both bodies, and a common centre of gravity shifts constantly.  
**Spatial Pulls-** where is the movement going in space?  
 Many different pulls can be active at once, organized around an icosahedron (figure with twelve sides). Pathways outlined in space spiral through three dimensions.



## Conclusions

What happens when a system of movement tries to progress and thrive while still eschewing definition? Is this in itself definitive? The interest in studying CI for me lies then not in an idyllic conception of an entirely free movement form rooted in the physical, but in the way its proposition begs questioning the self, authority, consciousness and control, natural-ness, and embodied behavior.

CI in its initial phase was predicated on adherence to necessity, to the natural- both in its physicality and its organization. However, being situated in the 'natural', it was open to imposed meanings and connotations (emotional, meta-physical, theatrical). Further, its locus of knowledge and power in communities (local, imagined) surely contrasted more commodifiable, hierarchical techniques, but was impractical as the form gained national and international popularity. Thus what made CI so powerful is also what made it truly of its time, functioning in this way more like a social movement than a technique- unpredictable, temporal, shifting in response to environment.

"Thinking with my nerve-endings.. not actively doing. Turnaround of moments somewhere before brain." -Field notes, November 29<sup>th</sup>  
 CI manifests through sharing weight and following a rolling point of contact. Thus, it follows that its movement is neither choreographed- one cannot predict which action will be necessary as each moment unfolds as a result of the one before- nor is it entirely free form improvisation- partners are always seeking and informed by another body or the floor.  
 "The sense of touch and physical reflex actions assume more importance for the dancer than the sense of vision and consciously chosen actions." -Cynthia Novack, *Sharing the Dance*

"It seemed to me like social forms very much determined the look of dances, or were a strong factor in the way they looked." Paxton, in *Sharing the Dance*  
 Hoping to move away from 'dictatorship'-like models, Paxton sought to develop knowledge collectively, in deference to innate reservoirs of individual impulse over any one teacher or choreographer- the form itself functions as teacher, master, and choreographer. My learning was similar in the first jam I attended, the bulk of which occurred 'on my feet'- through kinesthetic empathy as I watched, and proprioceptive experience as I embodied responses to my partner.

"Some jams can end up being all 'moves'."- Joseph Sengo  
 It is the implementation of CI's guiding principles- their embodiment and teaching- that forms a technique, which necessarily requires a pre-conceived approach to moving. The more it is recreated, the less it is discovered.

"The underlying technique needed to prepare for and survive the surprises of a *Contact Improvisation* duet is to pose and maintain a question ("where is my partner? where is down?") What happens when, after a few years of practice, what was once an unpredictable emergency situation becomes familiar? The never-before-imagined relationships with another person ... can be taken as a definition of the work, rather than the physical questioning that is the ground from which this bounty of innovative material springs."- Daniel Lepkoff, "A Question"

## Contextualizing Findings- lived experience in relation to theory and history