



Steve Paxton, head in hands.

photo: Kate Mount

DRAFTING INTERIOR TECHNIQUES

by Steve Paxton

How awkwardly we are damned if we don't or if we do, I thought to myself after the European Contact Conference in Berlin in 1988. During a lecture event I had been asked, "Just what is Contact Improvisation?" and I had muffed the answer. I was being asked by a woman with an attitude, in the presence of a number of veteran contactors, general public, and students, and I hesitated in order to think how the question should be answered for the whole group. The discussion up to that point had been full of historical revisions, elisions, pointed remarks about Americentric heavy-footedness. In short, the European contactors considered themselves second generation users of this form and wanted to know if they had to go through every step the Americans had gone through; and a few people who had come to the conference without prior experience just wanted



FICTITIOUS GASSES

drawings by Steve Paxton

an explanation of what this whole thing was and how it was run and how did one improve and get recognition—things like that, which would be reasonable questions in a normal organization.

The journal you are now reading had, among other things, been working for 15 years to elaborate on the basic answer to “what is CI?” And as time has gone on, the answer has shifted: away from an experimental dance phenomenon and toward a physical practice allied with a number of complex new body and mind studies. I have come to think of contact improvisation as a physical event best described negatively—not art, not sport, not most of the things which characterize dancing in this century.

But I hate to describe things in the negative. It is accurate, but the mystics used it first and I don’t like using their devices, which were used to try to inform students in conversations about the ineffable.

We, on the other hand, are trying to describe the corporeal. But it is no longer easy to do so. It is, in fact, getting more difficult. We now know too much, or think we do; the corporeal seems to be a complexity of social, physical, geometric, glandular, political, intimate, and personal information which is not easily renderable.

Once things were relatively simple. I thought I knew how this then-nameless work should not be described. It was to be an improvisation without any ambiguous appeals to the imagination, because I did not know precisely what “the imagination” was (in fact I thought doing this work might educate me to the meanings of imagination, improvisation etc.). For the same reason there should be no mention of sexuality, psychology, spirituality. I would leave these in the hands of the experts and proceed with what seemed more immediate—the senses and the physical body.

It did seem that before I could begin to train the senses of students, something had to happen in their brains. In recognizing that we do not begin to move from zero, that first we have a desire or image to launch the system into action, I decided that I had to work in the area of images, though cautiously. The images were to be, well, “real.” That is, they were not to be obviously unreal.

The effect of obviously unreal images upon the body is fascinating. For example, if you are told to imagine (that word!) your head is filled with a gas that’s lighter than air, it is difficult not to respond with neck extension and postural

straightening. Why should this be so?

It may be related to the sort of mobilization which happens when we are searching for a lost object—first, the thought of the object, then the eye movements, the head turning, standing up, facing in different directions, a tentative walk to a new viewpoint or a possible site of the object. All this prompted by the mental image of the desired object.

The responsiveness of the body to the image is innate, apparently, and with this innate connection the body may be responsive to any image the mind holds. But this is speculation about things which should be the subject of investigations. Without a theory of imagination to support our investigations, it seemed to me, we would have to improvise without fictitious gasses in the head—if that were possible.

At any rate, I had only about a week to come to convey the central idea before we, a group of apt students and myself, would be doing it in public at the John Weber Gallery in NYC each afternoon. This time pressure meant that this effect of images on the body would be an essential tool for quickly transmitting the initial states which would let this physical duet/improvisation manifest as directly as possible.

The first job was to point out this image-action connection. Then, exercises which demonstrate it in various parts of the body had to be produced. For instance, a mental exercise I gave while people were standing, in which they were to “imagine, but don’t do it, imagine that you are about to take a step forward with your left foot. What is the difference? As you were. Imagine...(repeat). Imagine that you are about to take a step with your right foot. Your left. Right. Left. Standing.”

At this point, small smiles sometimes appeared on people’s faces and I suspected they felt the effect. They had gone on an imaginary walk and had felt their weight responding subtly (but really) to the image; so when “Standing” was said, the smiles revealed that they got the small joke. They realized that I knew about the effect. We had arrived at an invisible (but real) place together.

The stand was useful. The basic event was standing and observing the body. This was an exercise in itself, though a very reductive one. What gets exercised in there, inside the standing body, is the habit of observation; a noticeable movement of consciousness through the body. Within this exercise there are encounters with parts of the body which tick along or breathe along as we watch. It clearly seems to be one sub-system, consciousness, examining others.

The other sub-systems are not obviously connected to the wandering consciousness, except that the encounter happens in what one calls “my body.” The consciousness-as-observer regards the other sub-systems as separate from itself.

The consciousness can travel inside the body. It is analogous to focusing the eyes in the external world. There is also an analogue for peripheral vision, which is the awareness of the whole body with senses open. Knowing these things and practicing them are different things, of course. We know far more than we can practice. We had to decide what to practice.

One choice was the tiny movements the body makes while standing. I felt they were examples of reflex actions. They were not directed by the observing consciousness. Observing them might train the consciousness to understand reflex speed without going through an emergency experience which is when we're most often aware of our reflexes.

We would be provided with many examples of reflex action when we began improvising in contact, but they might be of little use to us, because the consciousness can easily turn off to the experience of these reflexive moments. In other words, we can do something without "knowing" it. This successfully preserves the integrity of the body but does not train the consciousness; it leaves a hole in the knowing of the experience. Could the consciousness learn to see these gaps of awareness? Or, if not, could it at least learn to observe reflexive action calmly during the highly adrenalized moments?

Why is *full* consciousness so important to me? Because consciousness can be felt to change according to what it experiences. If a gap of consciousness occurs at a critical moment, we lose an opportunity to learn from the moment. A black-out lasting fractions of a second during a roll is not acceptable as full consciousness of the roll, and the gap will remain embedded in the movement as part of the over-all feeling of the movement. If consciousness stays open during these critical moments, it will have an experience of them, and will enlarge its concept to match the new experience. This expanded picture becomes the new ground for moving.

My speculation is that the gaps are moments when consciousness goes away. I don't know where. But I think I know why. Something is happening which is too fast for thought. For instance, the navigation of space is normally done with head erect and visual impressions comfortably constant, with the horizon's horizontality remaining an important reference for our orientation. When this visual reference changes too rapidly for our (rather slow) consciousness to comprehend, as in spinning, rolling, and other "disorienting" movement, something reflexive and much faster than consciousness takes over. We play with this dual aspect of ourselves on carnival rides, or when learning to turn in dance.

Dizziness and nausea are, I think, signals that we have reached the borderland between these two aspects, of physical control—conscious and reflexive. When we linger in the borderland on purpose, we become our own experiment. We are subjecting the reflexes to stimuli so our consciousness can watch them jump. Normally, consciousness easily slips out,



LEARNING FROM A GAP

reflexes step in, and then step aside again, as in the blink of an eye where most of the time we are unaware of any gap in our visual continuity.

Visual continuity is one of many ways we know "where we are," and not knowing where we are is experienced as an emergency situation. How many times a day, or an hour, do we re-orient, I wonder. At any rate, contact improvisation constantly challenges one's orientation: visual, directional, balance, and where in the body the consciousness is positioned. The challenge to orientation is not just in the more acrobatic aspects of the movement. Students were sometimes made nauseous by noticing their internal space while standing still. This, oddly enough, is probably a form of motion-sickness, which has been described as having a moving deck under one's feet but a steady horizon. In the stand, one experiences still feet and moving consciousness inside the body. In rolling or turning, the room seems (from the point of view of the eyes) to move, while the floor remains stable to the touch. What I had to do was resolve the problem of orientation so that the consciousness could stay aware of the movement. A chicken and egg problem.



VISUAL CONTINUITY

Everyone in this group was athletic and many of them were dancers, so presumably their consciousness had already been informed by body movement. But they weren't being asked to do what they knew how to do. They were being asked to improvise; to do (or allow themselves to do) what they didn't expect to do. Under these circumstances previously learned movement techniques often hamper rather than help the desired sort of manifestation. Movement techniques are useful for other reasons, of course, but not for examining gaps of consciousness during unexpected movement.

Consciousness, supported by a collection of images and internal observations which reinforced each other, had a job. It should not press the body, nor engage in time travel out of the body into memories or schedules because these bring images which will also affect the body, distracting from the improvisation at hand. In this improvisation the consciousness was to hang in with the body, during real time, and stay alert. It should be a witness.

This sort of consciousness—awareness of the present physical reality—is familiar to all of us. In fact the reason it is useful is that it is commonly understood, though employing it requires choices. Without a process of sorting we are confronted with such a variety of current physical images that we are inundated rather than guided into a practice.

As the right kind of images were found, a *working model* began to emerge in my mind. The working model was based on aspects of an experience that I'd had while working with another person, in which an interesting event occurred and was confirmed by both of us. Moments of the duet, typically manifesting as "accidental" and flowing streams of movement, were for both of us pleasant, highly stimulating, and elemental. With other partners, more confirmations. It was worth pursuing.

The working model was predicated on this experience and a desire to articulate the experience so others could find it. If others did find it, we were perhaps examining a basic mode of communication between the reflexes of people in physical contact as they moved. It was an idea which took two people to have. It wasn't wrestling, embracing, sex, social dancing, though it was an element of all of those. It needed a name, so we could refer to it without unwanted connotations. Contact Improvisation...?

To envision the exercises, I took the working model to be a simple imaginary person with no physical, sensorial, or social inhibitions. It was a generic person with positive elements I had observed in many students, dancers, martial artists, and children. I had met such a being in my partners when we were doing "it," the duet phenomenon. I had been such a being to them, apparently, when they too confirmed the moment. It had to be a fairly simple model, because the users (the students and I) were actually functioning human beings with more possible neuronal connections than there are particles in the universe. I could not cope with that of course, nor other evident human complexities. In terms of the safety of the body in active interaction with another body, though, I saw I could ask the student to concentrate on movement and how it feels, and then suggest concentrating on the sensations of their weight, momentum, friction, the touch of their partner, the sensation of the floor under their body, and to learn to maintain their peripheral vision of the space. The working model had these characteristics and others equally easy to understand. These were aimed at security, not at improvising. I recall saying that improvising could not be taught, though it could be learned.

But I did think that safety could be taught. "Keep your knees over your toes," for instance, is taught to students of dance. With the characteristics of the working model developed and understood by the students, I hoped they would be safe even if they were ass-over-teakettle.

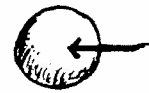
I pressed on. I made assumptions. I assumed I could explain things directly to the body ("notice gravity"). I assumed the body knew what I was talking about (gravity, usually ignored, moves into focus as a sensation of weight).

I assumed that the body, having evolved for millions of years on this planet, was tuned first by planetary things which create our potentials, and second by cultural things which develop select parts of the potential. This is in line with some current theories about how we acquire language; we are born with potential to make the variety of human sounds and language connections, but are guided into the specific

language of our culture, and the unused potential withers with disuse.

For the working model, the basic question was—potential for what? What had the culture physically suppressed or selected out which we might reclaim? We may, with a bit of experience of sub-cultures of our own, and other cultures, understand something of what our culture requires of us for inclusion: certain gestures, modes of posture and behavior—body language, as they say—which constitute proper social activities and communications, as well as the accompanying mental attitudes we acquire or aspire to for proper presentation of our 'selves'. Indeed, the very idea of a 'self' is probably a cultural construction.

In sports and dance the rules of physical behavior are altered from the basic social behaviors to encompass activities understood to be outside the social norm but allowable in a controlled way. These activities require different sensing modes than does the usual body language we must learn for eating in company or attending school. The working model and its characteristics were like sports and dance in that they were altered. However, they depart from one another in how they are learned. Contact Improvisation behavior evolves from sensing movement; dance and sports, from attempting movement and then letting the senses fall into line, or not.



SPHERICAL
SPACE

As to how we are educated... Not to become too embroiled in this, we may simply note that most of us learn to sit still and focus our attention for hours each day. The missing potential here is obvious - movement of the body and varieties of peripheral sensing.

Our alterations involved the investigation of space, time, and mass with senses in peripheral sensing mode: space becomes spherical, time is the present, mass is a changeable orientation to gravity.

In devising an approach to this working model of the body, I skipped blithely by constraints and taboos of touching, because people are accustomed to ignoring them on the subway, during sports, or in the doctor's office. And I did not emphasize the unpredictable nature of the improvisation, akin to dancing on constantly shifting ground, but suggested instead a *steady state* of watching the reflexes. Let the reflexes figure out how to deal with the unpredictable.

This method aimed to reclaim physical possibilities which may have become dormant, senses we have been trained to disregard. What would this lead to, really? It sounds very nice, this reclaiming and opening, but where would these changes take us? Who would we be?

When we began, in 1972, I went boldly into all this. The people in the group were young, healthy, and alert. I assumed that if we didn't consciously focus on problems we wouldn't create them, and at least such difficulties 35

surfaced would not have been projected. As I said earlier, things seemed simpler then.

It was to be assumed that some of these students would eventually teach something of what they were doing to others, and I felt the need to develop this material in such a way that the students were aware of the teaching mechanisms. It boiled down to making the principles—physical, mental, and cultural—known to them as they learned them. We had the services of Steve Christiansen and his video camera and spent hours, when we were not working on the mat, examining the movement and ourselves, the movers.

This was very useful. Video was, in those days, a new tool for witnessing the body/mind, and let us see points in action when we were operative but not conscious. Such moments, noticed with the help of the videotape or close observation by a partner, could later be examined in action. Clues about the nature of the gap might be noticed. We began to notice where the gaps appeared, at any rate, and something of their frequency. We also noticed high unfettered moments (and recalled the accompanying feelings). And we observed fettered duets where reflexive movement was not to be seen. Sometimes people seemed wary, unable to let go of conscious control. Disorientation, fear, or fixed habitual responses would be noticed.

In the working model, events of the emotions and disorientations which were felt in conjunction with a gap in awareness were considered to be symptomatic that the senses were not quite ready to report what was happening to the consciousness, that instead they were reporting to the reflexive part of the mind and body.

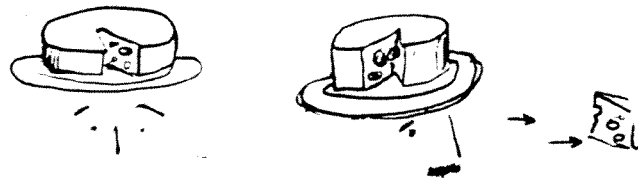
I couldn't understand the wary duets. Obviously trust was missing. With some other partner or on some other day, this tended to change. All I could do to cope with this mode was to have partners change regularly. Eventually everyone found a duet which led them to their reflexes.

When I proposed movement techniques they sometimes contravened ingrained movement habits: for instance, the aikido roll, which is a diagonally forward roll that arrived on our shores from the Orient. At the very attempt at this roll, students translated it into a somersault, the symmetrical forward roll we learn in Western movement. This misunderstanding could persist through any number of repetitions of examples and attempts and was seriously frustrating to both the students and me. If they couldn't put their finger on what was going wrong, I decided, it was perhaps because nothing in previous movement experience had prepared them for the movement principles which were developed in the Eastern martial arts.

These repeated attempts at the aikido roll provided the first gap I noticed. The act of propelling the body into the roll is slightly scary, and many people have open eyes before and after the roll, but in the moment when they are taking weight on their neck and shoulders, they have their eyes squeezed shut, and they are not aware that this is so.

I did not solve this two-part problem in time for the first performance, nor for many years after, though the students did perfect their somersaults.

I learned that before the body could find the new rolling



pattern it was useful for it to learn the sensations which an aikido roll creates.

The new sensations, and the parts of the arm, shoulder, and back where the sensations arise in the roll, could be explored without committing the whole body to the roll. This changed the position of the consciousness relative to the exercise. Instead of an unknown action vs. an habitual known action which is so similar that it subverts the attempt, the student has two knowable actions. One is new, tentative, but understood through the sensorial model. The other is habitual. Having remedied the first difficulty by establishing the difference between the two concepts of rolling, the gaps of consciousness in either could be ferreted out.

These explorations evolved into new technical approaches. It was noticeable that the approaches require that the student work with helpful mental attitudes as well as directly with the physical body. In the aikido roll example above, it was less helpful to know the pattern mentally and try willfully to do it than it was to become an observer of the sensations and to work calmly on each emotional, orientational, or habitual block as it arose.

The quality of consciousness was coming into focus. It wasn't all of consciousness and all possible interactions, of course. A working model for consciousness in this case is Swiss cheese. We buy it as a lump, and don't attend to the holes because we don't use them. I was trying to point to the holes, assuming that if a Swiss cheese could be aware of itself, then the cheesy part was one sort of consciousness and the holes were another sort, integral to the shape, the nature of the whole cheese. We can't take this model much further, I realize; which may be to the advantage of getting on with the movement and its interaction with the consciousness.

As we began work on opening up the senses to their larger potential, it became clear that each of the senses has images of differing natures. The Swiss cheese above, mostly a visual image in that I am concentrating on how the cheese looks, occurred in my brain and was transferred to another person by my voice, so it was a verbal transmission of a visual image. What was most needed in our work was kinetic imagery which was both appropriate to the movement mode and true (unlike the speculation about the consciousness of the cheese).

The small movements of standing "still," which formed the basis of this sort of investigation, are true; they are really there. But are they images or sensations? If we observed them, would they filter through the observing mind and affect

the body as images do? Does the nervous system and its mediation of posture relative to gravity have the possibility of teaching the consciousness, and does the consciousness have the property of amplifying or strengthening that mediation?

I assumed this reciprocity did exist. I decided that sensations are what we feel to be happening at the moment, and they can become images when we take notice that we are observing them. This suggests that the consciousness can be aware of itself—a defining characteristic—and that there is a positive use for this ability to split into self-regard. However, consciousness doesn't work very well with the unknown, as was revealed in the aikido roll. It seems to need to know or to be noticing in order to direct itself and the body. The attitude of "witnessing" may change this internal control issue. The search for internal sensations reveals that "I can feel the small movements." Then our attitude begins to shift toward, "The body is kept upright by constant reflexive muscular actions around the skeleton." First we feel the movements, then we can objectify the feelings into images. The moment between these perceptions can be as short as a hyphen. All the above suggests that there is an important difference between knowing-noticing and noticing-knowing.



CHICKEN & EGG

These are the sorts of thoughts which came to mind during the working period from January to June, 1972. Or to say it in terms of the work: from *Magnesium* at Oberlin College through the spring term at Bennington College where we further identified the premise, the phenomenon, to the presentation of the work in NYC I called "contact improvisations." Students from those two institutions (plus members of the downtown dance community in NYC who "sat in") were joined by students from the classes of Mary Fulkerson at the U. of Rochester. The Rochester group was least familiar with the proposed movement, and as Fulkerson was teaching them Release Technique via intensive *image work*, it was in order to reach these students quickly that the approach outlined above was developed beyond what had been necessary at Bennington College.

At Bennington, I had begun by introducing these students of Western dance to Aikido techniques. However, I soon abandoned teaching Aikido and started work on specific tools for the interior techniques. Although physical techniques could be found for specific movement training, what those students required was a vision of Eastern martial arts philosophy underlying the techniques (or a viable replacement for that). This laid the ground for introducing an improvisation which requires a state of personal involvement and physical responsibility with/for another person.

It must be pointed out that many of the ideas about moving which I used existed before this study. The teachings of Release Technique, Aikido, and several other physical and mental disciplines were influential, and were adjusted according to my understanding at the time in order to convey the movement principles of the area of improvisation described by the words *contact improvisation*.

Beyond that, to enable the movement to be accomplished safely, came physical exercises designed to introduce sensations that arise during "flying," lifting, and being lifted, and to physically strengthen the body for these energetic extremes of the form. Physical strength was seen as the result of finding the right, i.e., easiest, most efficient inner "pathways." Stress was discouraged.

We were starting to work on the technical method, a work which continues today, in an effort to describe what Contact Improvisation is on its own terms as a phenomenon of duet movement as well as in the personal terms of a student, who may for instance have physical strength but spatial weakness, or improvisational skills but does not trust their weight to another person.

To summarize: images were used to focus the mind and then give the mind foci within the sensations of the body.

The words had to be unambiguous, unthreatening, informative and generally understood.

The statements had to be true, obvious, relevant.

To speak was also to set the tone. I tried to simplify the issues of the body for transmission to another body. I moved the mind of my mouth into my body, located issues, and reported the issues speaking (I assumed) directly to another body. The student's consciousness was enlisted to manage attitudes and observe the effect of image on the body, and to derive from these effects, and others observed within their bodies, images which could be named and otherwise objectified and discussed, and fitted into the improvisational structure.

I made a number of assumptions. To study something like improvisation, which is defined as you go, everything you assume is going to affect the result. I tried to be aware of what the assumptions were and to let the phenomenon we explored, the narrower field of improvisation when communicating via touch with another person, guide the definitive imagery into appropriate areas.

This guidance caused us to consider all sorts of things, such as communication, emotion, psychology, sex, education, childhood development, culture, taboos, space, time, and the self. It is all very well to say that one takes responsibility for one's self in improvisation, but it is indeed a staggering job in its details. An improviser's job is never done. All this to explore the ability of the consciousness to cleave to the body's moment and remain there as the moment changes. ★

for John Cage