

**- mouvement.net N°48 (Juillet-Septembre 2008)**  
**Le Contact Improvisation, dialoguer par le toucher (extraits)**

**Suzanne COTTO**, choregraph and oestheopath

She discovered Contact Improvisation Dance (CID) in 1978 with Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson. She introduced and taught CID from 78 to 84 within the "Association Danse Contact Improvisation" (nicknamed Atelier Contact) with Mark Tompkins, Didier Silhol and other adventurers.

They invited foreign teachers, organized research sessions, jams, performances and joined a European network that started in 1982. After the breaking up of the association, she continued her route, exploring other paths and she regularly produces various performances. This year she proposes an improvisation workshop in Paris and this summer she is invited to the Contact Improvisation festival in Freiburg.

**Isabelle USKI :**

**Suzanne COTTO, you attended Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson's first training course in Saint-Baume's International Centre in summer 1978. Why did you attend this training course and what memories do you keep from this period?**

Suzanne COTTO : "I went to Saint-Baume with a group of dancers from Paris to attend Harry Sheppard's teaching (Cunningham's technique). There were several contemporaneous dance and music training sessions at the same time. During this creative bubbling, we saw a wonderful performance by Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson, and we felt like attending their Contact Improvisation Dance training course : a thrilling discovery. I was lucky to attend John Cage's teaching too as he was there. We worked on hearing and hazard. He made us perform a concert in the countryside, an unforgettable experience!

Back to Paris in autumn 78, some of us (among whom Mark Tompkins, Didier Silhol) were eager to continue our research in Contact Dance. We created the "Association Danse Contact Improvisation". We started with workshops and then training courses in Paris and the provinces and in Spain. And at the same time, right from 79 we invited American, British and Canadian people to take part in training courses and performances : Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson, Nancy Stark-Smith, Andrew Arwood, Dena Davida, Patricia Bardi, Christina Svane, Kristie Simson, Danie Lepkoff ...

We regularly organized weeks of research among us, long summer training courses and events (Avogadro ...). We organized a first European meeting in Saint-Baume in 1982. These meetings continued in Amsterdam, CNDC in Angers, Copenhagen ... This was growing in extent until came the lowest ebb in the mid 80s.

**What is this lowest ebb all about?**

The dance circle was not really interested in Contact Dance. I remember quite aggressive reactions from friend dancers. We cannot deny that the proposed performances were not always very interesting (improvisation needs being renewed all along a lifetime).

Touching, dancing hand in hand was badly seen, labelled as a nonsense rather than a real research. However, we had a few more or less interesting articles in the papers and on television, but there wasn't any accessible site available for that research. I found that other countries like Holland ( Amsterdam Theaterschool), England (Dartington College of Art), the United States (Bennington College of Art) had a far more interesting and adventurous approach in dance research than France. The CNSMD in Paris opened its doors to C.I. much later (Didier Silhol). Brigitte Lefevre had attended the training course in Saint-Baume, she had enjoyed it a lot but she never contacted us again.

Some people came to attend classes : Karine Saporte, Wilfried Piolet and Jean Guizérix. Then, we gradually saw on stage, dance shapes coming from the richness of Contact Improvisation being included in choreographies (Mark Tompkins, Joseph Nadj, partly worked in that direction).

In 1984, the association was dismantled. We taught less and less because fewer and fewer people were interested in training courses and classes. Dance as a whole was affected by this lowest ebb but the people who had become famous.

I then worked as an oestheopath as a logical follow up from Contact. There were still two Contact workshops a week left until 97 in Paris, in a dance studio, Bissonf Street ( this workshop is still on on Friday). We nicknamed it "The country bumpkins from Belleville!" What a sweet nickname.

I turned towards other explorations "outside groups". In 1991, I opened the "Movement and Fantasy Laboratory" that combines the subtle body mechanic with the joy of improvising and it also works on the body reactivity of the body in the space between the concrete physical ability and the imaginary field. In 2002, the "Trigger mechanism Concept" was born, the feeling of the right moment.

I make “Unidentified Choreographic Objects” with jazz and electroacoustic musicians as well as interactive artistic buildings. I no longer belong to the Contact community and I no longer teach it but I have mastered its exploration spirit and I do recommend practising it. I have followed other paths because I was feeling a wearing out of interest and above all a Contact style. All along my dancing experience (Classical dancing, Jazz dancing, Tap dancing, Contemporaneous dancing, Yoga, Tai Chi ...) It has always been the same story : I reach the end of a style and I need to change to feel what lies most vividly within myself until I am “out of style”. I felt like working on solitude, dancing food, the outside look, how space is structured ...

At the same time, all the discoveries that have been made since that time can be transferred to this C.I. space but for one detail : the physical fragility that comes as one grows older and that requires a great accuracy of gesture. So I avoid working with highly excited young fools who throw themselves all over the floor! I am going to Freiburg to try my new discoveries. I am eager to see how this technique is evolving, what needs to be refined; and I am also eager to dance with old friends I haven't seen for ages!

After the long lowest ebb that lasted about ten years in France, I was happily surprised to see that young dancers were getting hold of the torch. It was in 98 on the twentieth anniversary of C.I. in the Ménagerie de Verre in Paris. We gathered again to organize jam, performances ... as in the good old time. We were amazed to see a great bubbling among the young generation (dancers, circus people, comedians, musicians). The new blossoming of this technique shows today how relevant it is.

### **What did you like in this technique and how could you characterize it?**

It is a dance that gathers as many men as women, which is quite pleasant and unusual. It is a dance of explorers. With Didier Silhol, we had written : “It is some sort of a game between the opposing forces and not a relationship in terms of a power struggle between the partners and the elements”. We learn how to stimulate our perceptions, polish our reflexes. We take time and pleasure in venturing on hazardous creations in which the inner adventure is what matters the most because we don't know where we are going ...

In an article that I wrote in 1987, I gave the following definition : “Contact Improvisation is the art of conversation ... taken as ‘pouring together’ too. It is an hand in hand exchange in which the dancers knead each other and stretch out, rest and get back into movement, communicating strength and fragility. Dancing becomes a sharing-journey across the ages and the elements guided by the breathing of movement. We develop all the tracks that make and unmake us from standing up, downwards the floor and upwards the air again (...).

I have been hooked by Contact Improvisation, and I experience it as a subtle and simple path since the like life that goes through it is always so fragile and unexpected.”

### **There is no Contact Improvisation school. How do you feel about it?**

That's exactly the reason why it is my favourite technique among all the ones I have practised : you have no keys! It was high time ...

I enjoyed it when Steve Paxton introduced himself as a traveller, an explorer that gives tracks, ingredients so as to enable dancers to dance together. That's how Contact is being taught. It's a network.

As we had to be in pairs for an exercise, he had told experienced dancers to mix with beginners : “make them make the most of the freshness of your experience”. The more you work, the easier you make it, the fresher you become.