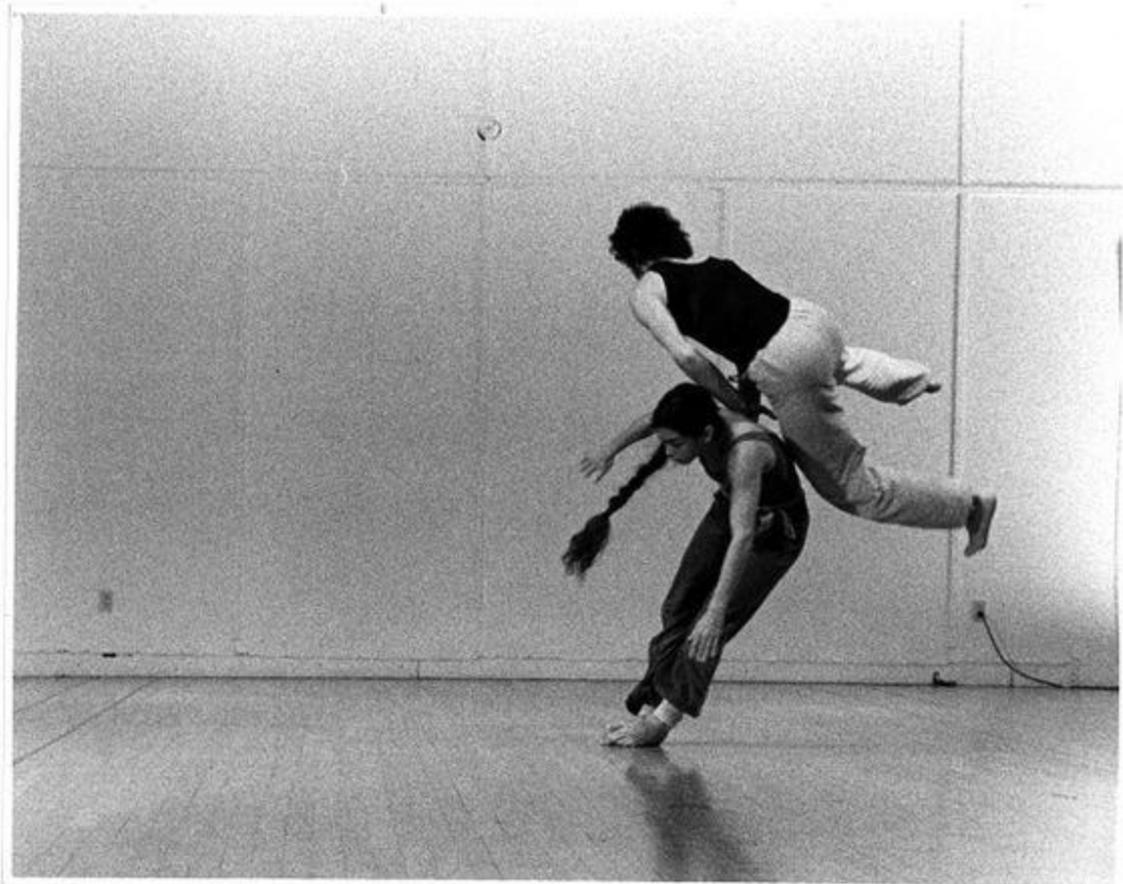


## **Mind and body connection, a review on Contact improvisation by Nancy Stark Smith**



Discovering dance performance this semester has awakened a part of myself that I wanted to explore. Throughout the year, I have researched what makes me feel so strongly when I use my own body during performance. I was eager to learn more about happens during improvisation specifically. I have been watching the work of the American choreographer Nancy Stark Smith on improvisation and reading the full journal of 'Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy'. In the volume 15, issue 1 'The art of movement improvisation in psychotherapy. Taking dance-movement improvisation into the intersubjective field', I have come across new concepts which taught me about the mind-body connection in performance.

Nancy Stark Smith has been the co-creator of Contact Improvisation, a dance practice that involves two partners or more who move together and react to each other in space. I watched a documentary entitled 'The poetics of touch: NANCY STARK SMITH, a pathway into contact improvisation' in which the performers make the conscious effort to get rid of muscle tension and expectations. Their movements are graceful, spontaneous, emotional and intuitive. Their bodies fall, roll over, slide and walk together until a sense of unity and connection is formed. The sensors of the body are collecting information about the partner and the surroundings. The body listens and processes the information. The body and the mind of the dancers make one as schools of fish or flocks of birds, they flow in harmony. Contact improvisation is a non-verbal dialogue between two individuals who meet each other through the body of their intimacy.

The mind-body connection that happens during performance and improvisation is mysterious. 'Improvisation means experimenting by activating internal connections between the body, emotions and thoughts; it is to enter a pre-verbal dimension of experience where meanings are multiple and no longer unambiguous. Improvisation in this sense implies access to a non-judgemental and non-interpretational internal structure that is open to receive what happens' (Colace & Menzani, 2008). According to 'Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy', performance demands a sense of self and a capacity to listen to the environment through interoception, proprioception and exteroception. Interoception is the perception that occurs inside the body. For instance, interoception can manifest as pain, tingling, soreness of muscles, etc. Proprioception represents the inner sense of ourselves in space, our capacity to understand our position and our location within an environment. Lastly, exteroception is focused on the perception of the environment outside of the body. Subsequently, the senses of our body help us to connect to the surrounding world such as the smell through our nose, the sound through our ears, the sight through our eyes, the touch through our skin or the taste through our tongue. Our body is the interface between the space outside and within ourselves.

Improvisation is quite a strange yet liberating practice itself for our body isn't used to moving without being utilized. Improvisation is a constant jump between the known and the unknown, the conscious and the subconscious. The body channels our emotions, performance brings emotions up onto our conscious mind and materialize them into concrete motion. The body remembers what we go through in our lives. The body remembers how to stop the alarm clock every morning, remove the covers, put feet on the floor and make coffee with eyes closed. The routine is engraved in the body's memory. It remembers how far to stretch arms to reach the cup, how heavy the cup is to put it on the kitchen counter without breaking it. It remembers our routine, it works with our subconscious mind and stores our suppressed emotions. In 'The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma' by Bessel Van Der Kolk, I have learned about the ways in which trauma is stored in our physical body which is why improvisation became important in psychotherapy. The MAMT (Movement Assessment Manual for Trauma) has become a practice in psychotherapy to access the subconscious body and mind and to heal. Patterns tend to represent the most interesting part of improvisation as they tend to reveal ideas that we feel the need to go back to and explore. When the body is improvising, it uses what it knows to move as well as exploring new motions and ideas. Intuition is a feeling that we can train in order to become more sensitive to it. Many choreographers use improvisation to come up with new ideas. Improvisation fuels creativity as it engages originality. The body creates as we think in the present moment. Inseparability is the first condition of improvisation according to 'Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy' for 'The act of composing and the act of performing are inseparable. (...) in improvisation the creative process and the result produced occur contemporarily (Sparti, 2005)'. In her video for Nowness, Kiani del Valle explains that her creative process is one of improvisation. Ideas emerge from the stream of consciousness that we express through our body. Improvisation is not deprived of meaning as there is intention and awareness in each movement.

Furthermore, I have also noticed that performance also makes me feel strongly as a viewer during the ballet performances that I have attended in the past, the documentary of Nancy Stark Smith and the performances that I have watched. The 'Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy' journal refers to it as the experience of kinaesthetic empathy. By identifying the movements of the performers, the body can experience empathy by projecting the sensations onto ourselves. A similar experience can apply to situations in which we witness someone getting hurt. Kinaesthetic empathy can make us experience pain as if we got hurt ourselves to some extent.

Improvisation is a fascinating technique in performance in which the performer has to train their body to commit to the present moment without judgement or expectation. The performer must have developed a deep sense of self and intuition in order to commit to the flow and the ability to 'listen' to our surroundings and partner.

## **Bibliography**

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Nancy Stark Smith and Alan Ptashek, photo. Erich Franz, courtesy of artists and Contact Collaborations, Inc, 1979.