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The emergence of contact improvisation in the aesthetic-political laboratory of the 60s and 70s

Mariela Singer[I]
[I]Universidad de Buenos Aires - UBA, Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT – The emergence of Contact Improvisation in the aesthetic-political laboratory of the 60s and 70s – This text reflects on the emergence of contact improvisation and the changes generated by postmodern dance in the American aesthetic-political context of the 60s and 70s. New modes of dance production developed by the New York neo-avant-garde of that period are addressed; the experimental attitude of the artists; and their interest in collaborative forms, among others. Based on the research results of my doctoral thesis, the literature on an emblematic discipline of postmodern dance, about which there are few publications in Spanish, is expanded. Further study may open imaginative horizons for new laboratory practices.
Keywords: **Contact Improvisation. Dance. Laboratory. Neo-Avant-Garde. Experimentation.**

RÉSUMÉ – L'émergence du Contact Improvisation dans le laboratoire esthétique et politique des années 60 et 70 – Ce texte réfléchit sur contact improvisation et les changements générés par la danse postmoderne dans le contexte esthético-politique américain des années 1960 et 1970. Les nouveaux modes de production de danse conçus par la néo-avant-garde new-yorkaise de cette période sont abordés; l'attitude expérimentale des artistes; et son intérêt pour les formes collaboratives, entre autres. Sur la base des résultats de recherche de ma thèse de doctorat, la littérature sur une discipline emblématique de la danse postmoderne sur laquelle les publications en langue espagnole sont insuffisantes et dont l'étude peut ouvrir des horizons imaginatifs pour de nouvelles pratiques de laboratoire est élargie.
Mots-clés: **Contact Improvisation. Danse. Laboratoire. Néo-Avant-Garde. Expérimentation.**

RESUMEN – El surgimiento del contact improvisation en el laboratorio estético-político de los años 60 y 70 – En este texto se reflexiona sobre el surgimiento del contact improvisation y los cambios generados por la danza posmoderna en el contexto estético-político estadounidense de los años 60 y 70. Se abordan nuevos modos de producción en danza gestados por la neovanguardia neoyorquina de ese período; la actitud experimental de los artistas; y su interés por formas colaborativas, entre otros. En base a resultados de investigación de mi tesis doctoral, se amplía la literatura sobre una disciplina emblemática de la danza posmoderna sobre la que existen insuficientes publicaciones en habla hispana y cuyo estudio puede abrir horizontes imaginativos para nuevas prácticas de laboratorio.
Palabras clave: **Contact Improvisation. Danza. Laboratorio. Neovanguardia. Experimentación.**

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Introduction

Contact Improvisation (CI) is a form of dance that emerged in 1972 in the United States, in the context of the political mobilization and aesthetic experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, groups of male and female choreographers, and dancers broke the boundaries of what was considered "dance" in the traditions of *ballet* and modern dance, generating new modes of artistic production and social organization in collectives dedicated to body movement.

The developments of this period gave rise to the so-called "postmodern dance", whose seminal milestone was the group of performances staged between 1962 and 1964 at the Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, New York. There, an exploratory laboratory was created between artists from different disciplines who questioned the traditional frameworks of what is considered "art", revisiting the avant-garde ideologies of the early 20th century. Their explorations broke down the boundaries between dance and life, undoing the limits between disciplines, reformulating the relationship between artists and spectators, and rejecting the showiness of artistic activity. The emergence of CI is inscribed in this experimental framework and its dance form materializes several of the transformations of that era.

The aim of this text is to reflect on the emergence of CI in relation to the changes generated by postmodern dance and the mobilized context of the 1960s and 1970s. To do so, I first introduce elements of the cultural and political framework of that time. Next, I discuss new modes of dance production and organization generated by the New York (neo)avant-garde of the 1960s; the artists' laboratory and research attitude; their interest in collaborative forms; the climate of experimentation and exchange between different disciplines; as well as renewed modes of learning and knowledge production; among other elements. Thirdly, I describe constitutive aspects of CI and the way in which this discipline embodies the kind of pursuits of postmodern dance and the micro-political struggles of the period. Finally, I summarize the aesthetic-political contributions of that era, pondering its timeliness in order to inspire other possible experiences.

This paper is based on the research results of my doctoral thesis and contributes to expand the literature on an emblematic discipline of postmodern dance, as is CI, on which the academic production in Spanish is

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still lacking (Brozas and García, 2014, p. 1), with the understanding that its study could open up imaginative horizons for new practices.

Countercultural movements, political activism and aesthetic experimentations in the 60s and 70s

The 1960s and 1970s in the United States were a period of political and aesthetic radicalization in which a diversity of experiences and processes emerged: demands for civil rights; Black activism; anti-war sentiment; the hippie movement; the emergence of student movements; experimentation with perception; feminism and calls for the liberation of the body; the exploration of sexual-affective relationships and community ties; among many others.

The changes during those years included transformations in the way of conceiving politics: as opposed to the logic traditionally linked to the occupation of power, in various counterculture spaces emphasis was placed on the construction of other forms-of-life. Sensitivity, affectivity and horizontality are valued and a politicization of bodies and everyday ties was produced. In these circuits there is also a critique of consumer society, inscribed in the framework of the "golden years" of the Cold War, in which the purchasing power of a large part of the working population had increased considerably and the quantity of consumer goods had expanded and diversified markedly (Hobsbawm, 2014, pp. 228-229).

The 1960s and 1970s were also the decades of important anti-war movements, which arose in response to the advance of the weapons and nuclear arms race by the two superpowers that emerged from World War II - the United States and the (former) USSR. The delirious scenarios of nuclear attack by the cold warriors and the constant threat of war generated pacifist movements in the international sphere. These movements were accompanied by protests against the U.S. intervention in Vietnam (1965-75), a conflict that ended up demoralizing and dividing the nation amidst televised scenes of riots and anti-war demonstrations.

This period also saw the expansion and radicalization of Black activism, which in the mid to late 1950s had given rise to the Civil Rights Movement, the first mass movement of the Black population on a national scale in the United States (Gatto, 2016, p. 38). In the mid-1960s, Black

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Power was born, leading to even more combative positions and the emergence of various organizations, among which the most prominent was that of the Black Panthers.

Another significant milestone in those turbulent years was the hippie movement, which began in the 1960s in the United States, predominantly in the city of San Francisco, California. Among its slogans, this movement adopted those of "make love not war"; unlearn what you learned in the classroom; appreciate spontaneity; live in communities; and experiment with perception and substances. It embraced sexual revolution and free love, held music festivals, and explored meditative techniques, opposing a hierarchically organized way of life, police authority, and established norms of behavior (Pastore, 2010, p. 54). As a counterculture, the hippie movement involved an increase in confrontation with consumerism, personal success and conformity, and expanded as one of the forms of youth radicalization.

The 1960s also marked the emergence of student movements as significant social and political actors. During these years, scientific and technical developments considerably increased life expectancy and late aging contributed to the reorganization of the ways in which young people were integrated into society, while at the same time the great economic expansion made it possible for countless families to send their sons and daughters to full-time education. Young people remained in educational institutions for longer, while university education and the number of undergraduate students expanded at an accelerated rate (Reguillo Cruz, 2000, p. 23).

While prior to World War II the university population was small and the vast majority of students were depoliticized or conservative, during the 1960s, with 1968 as a milestone year, student revolts in various countries revealed their transformative desire and radicalism, as well as their singular effectiveness in expressing political and social discontent (Hobsbawm, 2014, p. 261). France was the epicenter of the student uprising with repercussions on a continental scale (and beyond). But the French May of 1968 was not the only student revolt of that year: students triggered protests in the United States (at Columbia University, for example, immediately preceding the French May), Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, among other places. In the United States, in addition, hostility to the Vietnam War increased the fervent atmosphere in the universi-

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ties, and the student movement did not limit its demands to economic improvements, but also challenged social relations: academic hierarchies, the professor-student dichotomy, authoritarian leadership and the power dynamic in the university, among others.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s also affected the family and the home, relations between generations and between genders, sex-gender configurations, family hierarchies and everyday ties (ibid., pp. 271-277). From the 1960s onwards, there was an impressive revival of feminist movements, especially in the United States, which deepened in the 1970s and emphasized sexuality, the family, work and reproductive rights. The slogan "the personal is political", which emerged during this period, sums up the spirit of a large part of the claims made in the 1970s.

This was also marked by the emergence of a broad movement in defense of sexual freedom, which rejected the persecution of gays, lesbians, transvestites, transsexuals, as well as racialized migrants and marginalized sectors of the LGBT community. The Stonewall riot of 1969, in which these sectors fought against police repression at the Stonewall Inn bar in New York's Greenwich Village neighborhood, was a landmark catalyst for the modern LGBT movement. It was a turning point in the struggles for the recognition of dissident subjects and practices, as well as spawning the first Pride marches on June 28, 1970, a year after its anniversary (Duberman, 2018).

In the field of dance, the 1960s saw significant changes in experimental dance and theater: the search for qualities of movement and forms of organization became more acute, and informality, spontaneity and collective action increased. Students, choreographers and dancers began to generate more informal and economically accessible spaces for their performances, such as churches, warehouses or gymnasiums, initiatives borrowed from the visual artists who, in the 1950s, organized *happenings* in lofts or garages in New York City.

At the same time, the economic growth of the United States in the 1960s generated conditions that enabled the development of formal and organizational possibilities. The expansion of universities and the lengthening of the time spent in educational institutions, as well as the fact that young people could comfortably support themselves in cities with their families'

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money, allowed the number of students and dancers who found themselves experimenting to increase dramatically (Novack, 1990, p. 43).

The experimentations of the Judson Dance Theater and the emergence of postmodern dance

The Judson Dance Theater collective

In the early 1960s, in the context of the search for informal and accessible spaces for artistic exploration, such as churches, warehouses or gymnasiums, artists from various disciplines gathered around the Judson Memorial Church, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York. Curiously, this ecclesiastical space became an important space for contemporary and contentious artistic expressions and served as a venue for an attempt to combine dance and life, reviving avant-garde concerns manifested in other arts since the beginning of the 20th century[1].

The artists assembled in this sanctuary generated an opening with respect to what had been considered "dance" until then. The materialized transformations took place especially between 1962 and 1964 with the developments of the *Judson Dance Theater* (JDT), a collective of improvisation in dance-theater to which dancers, male and female choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, David Gordon and Yvonne Rainer, among others, belonged. The experimentations carried out by this avant-garde movement constitute the seedbed of postmodern dance.

The *Judson Dance Theater* group had sprung from a choreographic composition course taught between 1960 and 1962 by a musician, Robert Ellis Dunn, who had trained in music theory with John Cage, an avant-garde composer and collaborator of choreographer Merce Cunningham. The course had been taught in Cunningham's studio, in the same building used by the *Living Theater* (on Sixth Avenue and 14th Street in Manhattan), an experimental theater group that emerged in the 1940s in New York, which was governed by libertarian and cooperative principles and was part of the experimental climate of those years.

Late in Dunn's course, in the summer of 1962, a group of young choreographers decided to publicly present their work. Seeking a venue to showcase their experimental work in a professional concert format, the group auditioned and was welcomed at Judson Memorial Church. Concert

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number 1, held in July 1962, was open and free to the public and lasted several hours, with 23 dances on the program developed by 14 choreographers and an opening dance consisting of a film, called by a musical term: "Overture".

That concert represented the beginning of a significant process in the history of the discipline. In the course of the following two years, in its "golden period" (which lasted until April 1964, concert number 16), almost 200 dance pieces were presented by the *Judson Dance Theater* (JDT), the name by which the group began to designate itself at the start of 1963.

During this period, new modes of production, distribution and reception of dance were developed, which meant a drastic change in the manner of defining a work. JDT choreographers questioned the aesthetics and codifications of both ballet and modern dance, rejected the traditional format of the dance concert, and explored ways of performing and challenging spectators, as well as of observing productions. They rejected the demands of "communicating" an "artistic meaning" and called into question the notion of art and the authorial creation of works, shattering the romantic ideology of the individual artist and contributing to the consolidation of collective work. They also created a cooperative method of producing concerts, sharing, exchanging and alternatively distributing tasks of coordination, production, organization and diffusion of events.

In the JDT group there was a renewed interest in the experiences of the historical avant-garde (already present in the productions of Cunningham and Cage), which is expressed in the provocations directed against the institutional supports of dance as art. These provocations found an antecedent in the works of Marcel Duchamp and Eric Satie, figures who served as a nexus between the proposals of the historical avant-garde and what in the Greenwich Village district would be called "neo-avant-gardism" (Tambutti, 2009a, p. 8).

The collaboration between Cunningham and Cage was a major influence on the JDT. Several of the group's members had participated in Cunningham's company and incorporated his accomplishments and breakthroughs as a choreographer.

The influences of Merce Cunningham in the JDT

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Since the late 1940s and early 1950s, Cunningham had offered a refreshing approach to dance. He created a form of dance in which movement involves no more than the presentation of the physical action itself, moving away from interests linked to representation and expression. He also developed new compositional methods: he rejected composition based on musical forms, themes or any meaning external to dance, as well as the subordination of movement to other scenic manifestations. He proposed achieving the choreography by the very becoming of the movement, eliminating the thought, images or previous ideas, and being guided by the body itself (Novack, 1990).

Cunningham works along with and under the influence of the musician John Cage. Both consider music and dance as autonomous entities, regardless of their potential coexistence. An important innovation that Cunningham introduces in the field is the consideration that *any* movement is dance material. Just as Cage, in his experimental music, conceives of any sound as "music," even silence; for Cunningham, all bodily movement, including stillness, is considered "dance" and a possibility for choreographic composition.

Cunningham also takes from Cage the technique of "chance", which incorporates improvisation as a means of experimentation and research into artistic production (Novack, 1990, p. 26). Through this choreographer, a new awareness of chance and improvisation appears. He uses compositional methods of chance, such as flipping coins or choosing cards at random, as well as the interpretation of hexagrams from the *I Ching*, to determine the order of movements in a phrase, the sequence of phrases in a dance, the places to put the dances on stage, the number of dancers in a section or the parts of the body to be activated. With all these elements, which the dancers often have to extract before going on stage, he conceives works whose final result is unrepeatable. This means that the dancers cannot know beforehand the work or its entrances and exits, or even the steps to be performed, until the moment before going on stage.

Cunningham was part of the neo-Dadaist wave that burst forth along with the group *Fluxus*.[2] He also established relations with Marcel Duchamp, thus building a bridge with the historical avant-garde. From 1944 onwards, he produced dance concerts that radically broke away from the

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traditional modern dance of the time; in this sense, his innovations in dance matched those of his colleague John Cage in music.

Cunningham's works lack drama and the dancers appear as arbitrary and casual elements. There is neither development nor end point. The choreographer aims to free the dance from everything that is ancillary to it: he does not control it by means of music or fix it in space, he does not guide it by a narrative or feeling, nor does he let time delimit it in any way. However, although he freed dance from its 19th century relationship with music, this did not prevent him from creating works in which music is included as an element, as well as design: music, design and choreography can occur simultaneously, while not creating a dependent relationship, of execution or subordination, between one and the other. His works also challenged the traditional spatial conception of a privileged vantage point for observation and opposed directing the viewers' perception. In fact, later, towards the end of the 1970s, when the Walkman became fashionable, the audience following the Cunningham/Cage duo often brought headphones to the performances of their works to provide their own musical accompaniment while the dancers performed their movements (Tambutti, 2009b, p. 16).

Cunningham exerted a great influence on the choreographers and dancers of the following generations, especially on those who participated in the experimentations that gave birth to postmodern dance. His innovations opened new thresholds for experimentation and enabled the radicalization of the ruptures carried out up to that moment in dance. In this sense he is considered to be a hinge "at the edge of modern dance and postmodern dance" (Banes, 2013, p. 136).

On the other hand, through his musical collaborator John Cage, a young generation of artists encountered the heritage of the European avant-garde in art and performance. The dancers were influenced by Cage in their interest for Zen Buddhism, the writings of Antonin Artaud, the methods of chance and the value given to the everyday.

Experimental climate, breaking disciplinary boundaries, and exchanges between artistic practices

One aspect of the experiences at Judson Church that left a significant legacy is the view (and the attitude that goes with it) that everything can be

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considered a "dance" and observed as a dance: even the work of a visual artist, a musician, a camera operator etc. is regarded as a dance from this perspective.

The time was ripe for such a movement in Greenwich Village. This Manhattan neighborhood, with its progressive tradition, which has accommodated various counterculture political manifestations (and which would give rise, a few years later, in 1969, to the Stonewall revolt referred to above), was an intensive center of theatrical, literary and artistic activities. In the context in which the economy was expanding, there was an active spirit of participation and an interest in using accessible materials, living cheaply and making art economically. The pragmatic post-war environment was expressed in various art forms: from *happenings*, which made use of the areas at hand, to New Realism or Pop Art, which made reference to industrial objects; as well as Duchamp's ready-mades, which conferred artistic status on everyday objects. And ideas spread from one art form to another.

Philosophy and certain spiritual trends from the East were also included in these exchanges. The philosophical fascination with Zen Buddhism, existentialism and phenomenology was in tune with certain aspects of American art that defined the 1950s and early 1960s. The phenomenological exhortation "Zu den Sachen!" ["To the things themselves"] and the interest in everyday action are propagated in the manifestos of artists from various fields.

The Judson Church was an explosion of ideas in a variety of fields and transdisciplinary contributions that instilled new attitudes about what could be considered "dance". On the other hand, the audiences also consisted of artists, painters, musicians, dancers, writers, filmmakers and intellectuals, as well as Greenwich Village residents. It was an active audience, aware of the crisis in modern art, hungry for surprise and provocation.

The renowned postmodern dance historian Sally Banes, in relation to the artistic exchanges of the period and how they transcend disciplinary boundaries, highlights the fact that the dance collective that introduced radical ruptures in the 1960s emerged from a choreographic composition course coordinated by a musician (Banes 1995, p. 2). Dunn was neither a dancer nor a choreographer, but the musical accompanist in the studio of Cunningham and other well-known choreographers of the period. In this

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sense, another significant contribution by Cunningham to the generation of postmodern choreographers is that he incorporated Robert Dunn as a teacher in his school. In fact, it is through him that Cage's ideas, especially the procedures of chance, came to his composition class.

Dunn's classes were a microcosm of the New York artistic avant-garde, not only in terms of the incorporation of elements from Cage (and the recovery of Bauhaus school concepts that excited the musician), but also the assimilation of various cultural concerns from the 1960s, including Zen Buddhism, Taoism, existentialism, and scientism. Many of the ideas that circulated in the artistic and social networks of Greenwich Village found their form in the dances and discussions in Dunn's courses. The course was a small world of poets, painters, dancers, actors, and musicians small enough to get to know each other and their work, a world that had a connection to the Dadaists. At the same time, the informality and flexibility of the workshop enabled the participation of non-dancers in dance pieces, as well as the assumption that non-dancers could not only dance but even choreograph; ideas that gained solidity in the 1960s in the practices of various choreographers and in the dialogue between artists from diverse terrains.

New forms of learning and knowledge production in the JDT: horizontal exchanges among students, collaborative work and search for informal spaces

As for the classes, the students had a variety of resources that they brought from different spaces and disciplines (through the dancer Simone Forti, for example, the ideas of the renowned choreographer Ann Halprin, with whom Forti had studied, became evident). There were horizontal conditions in the exchanges and in the contributions of the students. In this sense, dancer David Gordon recalls that he found the classes fabulous, but more than the content of the teaching itself, it was due to the fascination he felt for the other students and for their spirit of exploration and research (Banes, 1995, p. 30).

For his part, dancer Steve Paxton, from the beginning of Dunn's classes, was interested in challenging the uses of modern dance, including the methods and habits of the people he respected, such as Cunningham himself. He tried to find sources of movement outside the technical vocabulary,

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turning to everyday actions. Yvonne Rainer recalls Paxton performing a dance in which he sits on a bench and eats. Paxton comments in retrospect, about his work in Dunn's classes, that he worked out all her "why-nots" and that it was a very permissive time. He also remembers Dunn as a sort of Zen master in the sense that he taught by denying them explanations, making brief mentions, and then immediately disappearing, leaving with a smile (ibid., p. 10). On the other hand, for Paxton, the history of modern dance had been tainted by personality cults, and he sought ways to neutralize any traits of the artist in his own work.

As for the instructions in the workshop, they were generally unspecific except for the question of duration: "do a three-minute dance" could be an exercise (ibid., p. 21). The interest in time and its perception was in line with the fascination experienced in the 1960s with respect to Zen meditation; the altered sensations of time under the influence of drugs; and the influence of phenomenology on some circuits. The perceptions of time, space and the work of the body were three important concerns of the new post-modern dance that grew out of Dunn's workshop and the JDT (Banes, 1980).

In the spring of 1962, toward the end of their choreography course with Dunn, the students set out to make public the developments they had been sharing. They had a body of work that they felt would be a waste not to show even once. They decided to look for a larger space than the one they had in the *Living Theater* building. They consulted the Judson Church and were welcomed.

In this group there was also a special interest in producing cooperatively and collectively. In this sense, Rainer reminisces about concert number 1 at the Judson church:

> The church seemed a positive alternative to the once-a-year-rent-a-hall mode of operation that had hegemonized the modern dancer's struggle in the past. Here we could present things more frequently, more informally and more economically, and-most important of all-more cooperatively (Banes, 1995, p. 70).

The JDT strongly criticized the retreat of modern dance towards inner consciousness, the recourse to introspection and the idea of individual inspiration. For the group, artistic activity is a cooperative work in dialogue,

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both between creators from different disciplines and between artists and spectators.

Figure 1 -Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton in *Word Words*, 1963, one of various Works by the *Judson Dance Theater* collective. Manhattan, New York.

Source: Photo by Al Giese.

Experimental compositional methods

In terms of compositional methods, there was a confluence of *chance* techniques and mystical philosophy in both Dada and the New York avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. Chance; collage; free association; slow meditation; repetition; lists of actions; manipulation of objects; proposing games and solving tasks are some of the methods employed by Dunn as well as by the dancers and choreographers participating in his seminar. Logical structures, the realization of simultaneous events, the primacy of the visual in theater, noise in music, the inclusion of real objects on the surfaces of paintings and, in general, the everyday world as a provider of material for *happenings* are also translated by the young choreographers in terms of dance. They are members of an artistic community influenced in part (in addition to Cage's ideas) by the disruptive spirit of Halprin's workshops (those who had been his students introduce his teachings) and also by the theatrical avant-garde of the *Living Theater* (with whom they shared the same build-

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ing in Cunningham's studio). In the spaces occupied by this community, rich exchanges of ideas took place.

Sources outside dance are equally important for the exploratory spirit of postmodern choreographers, who find performance structures in new music, visual arts, poetry and theater, especially in *happenings* and the neo-Dada group *Fluxus*. Duchamp's ready-mades also showed artists of that period the possibility of incorporating objects of ordinary use in dance works, contributing ideas on the potential of untrained or unspecialized bodies and on the incorporation of everyday movements (Tambutti, 2009a). On the other hand, there are exchanges of people between the different arts: some of the young choreographers perform in *happenings*, while painters, poets and musicians often appear or even compose dances. This inclusion of non-dancer friends of the choreographers allows untrained bodies to appear in the performances, which was a recurrent practice in the 1960s (Banes, 1995).

Finally, another crossover between different fields in those years was between dance and technology. The technological developments of the second post-war period and the search for new materials for artistic work led to exchanges between engineers, artists and technicians, in a proposal for horizontal work that was oriented to subtract from hierarchies between "artists" and "manual workers", considering the different tasks as a creative and necessary work to energize the productions[3].

The democratization of bodies in dance and the opposition to entertainment logics

Since the early 1960s, the impulse of postmodern choreographers has been to deny virtuosity in the sense of rejecting the differentiation between a specialized body ("dancer") and the body from everyday life. The new "virtuosity" of choreographers deals with the everyday and is oriented towards combining the display of physical intelligence with a simple *mise-en-scene*.

Several shows from those years included diverse corporealities (fat, skinny, young, elderly, etc.) and people not linked to dance who performed extremely simple everyday gestures in the works, such as, for example, walking. A milestone in this regard was Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967), staged

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with a large number of people (it had been written to be performed by between 30 and 84 people and was performed with 40) who walk from one side of the stage to the other, from right to left, alternately interrupting the movement to remain still, standing or resting on chairs placed on the floor, according to a score or written notation that specifies a few general guidelines, including that of keeping the walk free of narrative. The work is only about walking, stopping and/or sitting. Paxton's gesture in this performance is significantly disruptive: it urges us to observe everyday bodies and movements in their radical singularity, to look at ordinary bodily performativities as *dance*.

Likewise, this type of performance went against the logic of the spectacle being oriented to the entertainment of spectators and encouraged them to observe from the perspective of an investigative interest in corporeality and its singularity and multiplicity.

The rejection of the logic of spectacle and entertainment was radical in those decades and is expressed, among other materials, in Yvonne Rainer's landmark 1965 text, "No Manifesto":

> NO to spectacle. NO to virtuosity. NO to transformations and magic and make- believe. NO to the glamour and transcendence of the star image. NO to the heroic. NO to the anti-heroic. NO to trash imagery. NO to involvement of performer or spectator. NO to style. NO to camp. NO to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer. NO to eccentricity. NO to moving or being moved.

Contact improvisation

CI originated in the early 1970s in the United States from the experimentations of Steve Paxton, who was interested in exploring emerging movements by putting two bodies in motion together (Pallant, 2006, p. 10). Paxton noticed an absence of duet work and the exploration of communication between bodies in modern dance and *ballet*. This concern led him to experimentations that resulted in a dance based on contact through physical dialogue from weight, balance, reflexes and impulse (Stark Smith, 2008, p. XI).

CI is based on improvisation from contact and exploration between bodies. The movement is not based on choreographic modalities, but emerges progressively from that contact; the forms are produced without

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prior conceptual elaboration and without being the object of subsequent fixation. On the other hand, improvisation is assumed as movement in itself (as opposed to what happens in other dance currents where it is used as a training technique); each moment operates at the same time as work material and as an aesthetic "result", privileging the process over any isolated result.

A significant aspect of CI is that it is not developed on a stage but mainly through collective improvisation spaces called "*jams*": informal, self-organized gatherings that anyone can attend and dance with whomever they meet, whether friends or strangers, young or old, experienced or beginners[4].

The seminal milestone of CI took place in January 1972 in the state of Ohio, when Paxton was invited as a member of the Grand Union choreographers' collective to give a seminar at Oberlin College, in a three-week artistic residency. There, together with a group of students attending his seminar, he presented the show *Magnesium,* in which the dancers created an improvisational performance that was difficult to classify within the dance proposals known up to that time: with no music, in loose clothing and bare feet, they experimented with the interaction of body contact and physical forces, exploring weight and throwing themselves onto other bodies and/or the floor, staggering among themselves and against the floor, colliding, rolling, falling and getting up to stagger again, unfolding their movement, at no point facing the audience or prioritizing a performing front. After ten minutes of marked dynamism, towards the end, the dance stops and the dancers remain apparently "still" for several minutes, in an exercise that will later be known as "the little dance" (Novack, 1990; Pallant, 2006, p. 11)[5].

While the *Magnesium* show is considered the founding milestone of CI, the dance became known as such a few months later, when, in June 1972, Paxton developed a series of performances at the John Weber Gallery, a New York City art gallery located in Soho. This event was called "Contact Improvisation".

Invited by a company in New York, Paxton used the money to pay for travel and lodging for approximately 15 dancers with outstanding athleticism, whom he invited to explore the principles and potential of communication initially evidenced in *Magnesium* (Nelson and Stark Smith, 1997, p. 2). Most of the group members lived together for two weeks in a loft in

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Chinatown. There, they worked on an Olympic-sized wrestling mat, testing the possibilities of two bodies moving together in physical contact.

Most of the rehearsals took place in the course of everyday life, without established schedules, and they sometimes continued throughout the day and night. The first week was devoted to rehearsals, the second to performances in a public display of the work in progress. The gallery performances were intended as a continuation of the rehearsals, lasting five hours a day, and the audience could stay as long as they wished. There was no lighting or costume effects, no music or scenery, no program announcing dancers' names, and no rows of seats separating them from the audience (Novack, 1990, p. 64; Pallant, 2006, p. 12). With no traditional stage, dancers informally took turns on the edges of the mat and entered the space without any established signal or marker other than their own momentum. They also worked outdoors in the parks of New York City.

Inspired by this event, the work continued. In early 1973, Steve Paxton, Curt Siddall, Nancy Stark Smith, Nita Little and Karen Radler toured the West Coast to develop performances and CI workshops under the name "You Come, We'll Show You What We Do," a descriptive expression of the experimental character of these shows. The working environment in the performances is informal, just as it had been in *Magnesium*: no music, no special stage clothes, with the audience surrounding them and having duos and trios mixed with solos (Stark Smith, 2008, p. 2).

Beginning that year, different CI groups began touring throughout the United States traveling, eating and living in community. Rehearsals were no different from living together and the dance space overlapped with the space of everyday life.

Already in the early years of its inception, CI spread throughout the United States and Canada and in the 1980s (with some previous experiences in the 70s) to other countries and continents, and is currently practiced in more than 50 countries. Over these decades it has become an emblematic discipline of postmodern dance and has exerted a considerable influence on the styles of movement and training resources for other dance trends, especially modern dance.

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Figure 2 - Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith improvising in the performance of *Freelance*. Northampton, Massachussetts, 1980.

Source: Photo by Stephen Petergorsky.

Figure 3- John LeFan, Nancy Stark Smith and James Tyler in *Mariposa Studio*, 1978, dancing CI.

Source: Photo by John LeFan.

Materialization in the CI of the artistic and political transformations of the 1960s and 1970s

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In its formal materiality, CI embodies several characteristics introduced by postmodern dance, as well as transformations in the countercultural and political climate of the 1960s and 1970s. An important aspect, from this perspective, is the opposition to the logic of spectacle and entertainment.

Paxton insisted that the exhibitions should not be oriented to the entertainment of spectators, but that each performance in public should constitute another moment in the exploratory process, to which is added the possibility of sharing the creation of new qualities of movement. This rejection of making a spectacle of the exploratory practice is clearly seen in his exhibitions: already in *Satisfyin' lover*, as mentioned above, and also in *Magnesium*; for example, from the incorporation of the "little dance", which distances itself from the logics of entertainment and disregards the eventual tedium that watching subjects standing still for several minutes may cause in the audience. A refusal to make movement a spectacle could also be seen in the absence of specific settings, characterizations or costumes.

Another significant aspect that integrates the CI of the postmodern idea is the rupture of the limits between dance and life, especially through the incorporation of everyday movements and bodies. Any body can dance CI, including bodies with functional diversities (especially starting from the *danceability* technique, based on CI and specifically oriented to mix bodies with functional diversities), insofar as there are no physical requirements for its practice and since in this discipline any body movement is considered a dance object, even looking or breathing. In this sense, the inclusion of simple actions in dance, such as walking or breathing, disrupts the boundary between dance and everyday movements (Pallant, 2006, p. 11).

The focus on the *physicality* of contact; the absence of narrative or musical elements; the valorization of the body *per se*, of movement and *physicality* without additions; the refusal to subordinate the body to other languages and to turn it into an "instrument" of representational logics; are other aspects that CI incorporates from the ruptures generated by postmodern dance (and already by Cunningham).

Likewise, in this non-representational dance, gender roles are also neutralized, according to which traditionally masculinized bodies are responsi-

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ble for initiating and activating the movement, as well as physically supporting their partner, who has the role of being lifted and following her partner's movements. In CI, however, these roles tend to fade away and the shared weight is learned to be managed in such a way as to equalize the possibilities of being lifted and lifting male and female partners, regardless of specific sex-gender configurations. Thus, in the *jams*, feminized people, as well as different bodies, elevate other bodies in the dance regardless of their gendered identity. In this sense, it is often emphasized that CI materializes the demands of feminisms from the 1960s and 1970s and is opposed to the binary-heteronormative conception of gender (AAVV, 2015, p. 19).

Figure 4- Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton in 1984, in New York. The photo shows how the woman elevates the man in the dance, as opposed to the traditional gender roles in the dance field.

Source: Photo by Bill Arnold.

The exploration with touch and perception represents another constitutive element of this dance. Here we can recognize the effects of the countercultural climate of those decades and the value given to experimentation with sensibility, the body and perception in the hippie movement and other circuits. Likewise, the inscription of CI in the countercultural atmosphere of those years can also be seen in the community gatherings held by the practitioners as a form of social bonding that accompanies this type of dance form, especially in its early years.

Finally, another highly significant aspect of CI that reflects the transformations of those decades is the regular performance of this dance in the

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jam space. This broke with the staging logic of traditional academic dance, bringing dance closer to life and also disrupting the conventional relationship between artists and spectators. In CI, there is no division between those who dance and those who watch, other than in unstable and rotating modes. The *jam* is not an environment that urges attendance in the logic of spectatorship. Those who attend can (and usually do) join the dance at different moments of the encounter while at other times resting and observing the dancers. Similarly, the observation is not that of someone who attends a show according to the logic of entertainment, and the dance movements are not oriented to be paraded in front of a spectator.

Conclusions: contributions of CI and postmodern dance.

The most radical transformations of postmodern choreographers are linked to the opening up of dance's limits and the inclusion of any movement and any subject into the dance field. This redefined the boundaries that separated art from everyday life and reformulated the very conception of what was considered *art* (*dance* in this case).

The valorization of the everyday and the consideration that *any* movement can be dance (which was already present in the work of Cunningham and which the postmodernists amplify) imply that stillness as well as the act of combing one's hair, walking, eating, telling stories or even the mental action of language are deemed to be "dance". Movement is stripped of theatrical effects. The action takes up exactly the same time and space as outside the theater. What makes a movement a "dance" (and not an ordinary movement), more than the internal structure of its content, is the functional relationship to a dance context. This configures an opening of the limits of the field and implies the construction of another spectator and new ways of looking at dance concentrated on the movement itself and detached from interpretation.

Argentine dance historian Susana Tambutti summarizes the legacy of the JDT on the basis of the following aspects: the introduction of a performative temporality that does not adjust movement to an external or scenic time; a new conception of the body that assumes it as an object in itself and renounces the parameters of virtuosity; the concern for participation and democracy on several levels: in the annulment of hierarchies between

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dancers and non-dancers, in collectivism, which replaces personal projects and/or leadership, in the new network of relationships with other arts and in the way of questioning the spectators; the transformation of the concept of the *work's unity* to a continuous becoming; the alliance between dance and technology; the rapprochement between art and life; and a radical critique of representative logics (2009a, pp. 25-27).

Furthermore, other distinctive characteristics of postmodern dance include: the refusal to subordinate movement to narrative, music, meaning, interpretation or emotion; minimalism in movement; the elimination of specific costumes different from those of ordinary life; the incorporation of informal and economical exhibition spaces. These last aspects are characteristic features of this period: the rental of churches, the use of art galleries, museums, warehouses, lofts, gyms and even farms become a common practice in postmodern dance; and, in addition, dancers generally dress casually, in jogging pants, t-shirts or street clothes, and dance in silence in luminous spaces.

Figure 5-Yvonne Rainer in *Afternoon* (1963), the work by Steve Paxton performed on a farm.

Source: Photo by Peter Moore.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the proposal of this text to address the experimentations of the 1960s and 1970s intends to contribute to inspire new horizons of exploration, especially in a context as complex as the current one, in which the pandemic has increased the difficulties facing artistic activity in general.

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The creative practices deployed in the decades studied; the strong commitment to collaborative work in those years; the exchange of resources and ideas between different arts and the disruption of the boundaries between disciplines in an inclusive sense, aimed at recognizing the capacity of subjects for different artistic practices beyond their professions or disciplinary identities (the idea that *any* body —not only the professional dancer— can dance; or the recognition, in a musician, of his or her capacity to teach compositional methods in dance or even to choreograph); the observational character valued in the gaze —instead of granting it a function of judgment according to criteria of virtuosity—; among many other issues of the described experimentations, enable an opening of the horizon of possibilities to imagine and possibly also encourage the realization of possibilities when seeking new spaces and methods for performance in our present time, which tends to be increasingly complex in terms of artistic experimentation.

Notes

[1] The Judson Church, designed in 1892 and located south of Washington Square in Greenwich Village, had promoted cultural and union organizing activities in the 1930s and assisted the civil rights movement, among others. Successive parishioners were widely involved in political and artistic activities. After World War II, the Judson Gallery was organized there, showing works by pop artists. In the 1960s, the Judson Group put on a program of *happenings*. In the summer of 1961-62, the Judson Poets' Theater performed there, followed by dance performances. The activity at the Judson was extensive and the theatrical actions developed there enabled the creation of the Judson Dance Theatre group in 1962.

[2] The Fluxus group was an international movement —European and American— developed since 1961 from the interest in Dadaism and the figure of John Cage. It sought to mix different artistic disciplines (music, movement, plastic arts). Its productions included pamphlets, stamps, posters and films.

[3] Different experiments carried out in the dance-technology crossover had their moment of consecration in October 1966, in the event *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering* —in which figures such as Steve Paxton participated—, which was part of the *Experiments in Art and Technology* (EAT) project, conducted in New York.

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[4] The term "jam" is taken from the jazz scene, where jams are spaces where musicians meet to improvise. "Jam" is an acronym for "Jazz After Midnight".

[5] The "little dance" is an introspective exercise of perceptive exploration focused on noticing the movement of one's own body and the swaying and disposition of the weight in an upright position and in a state of (apparent) "stillness". The breathing and the disposition of the weight in relation to the gravitational forces produce spontaneous postural modifications, practically imperceptible for those who observe in an external way, but significant for those who manage to deeply enter into the experience.

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Mariela Singer holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). Adjunct Professor of the Circuito de Formación Feminista de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales (FSOC-UBA). Director and Academic Coordinator of the Postgraduate Refresher Program "Cuerpo, comunicación, estética y política. Perspectivas situadas y feministas" (FSOC-UBA). Undergraduate and graduate professor at Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo de la UBA. Coordinator of the Area Cuerpo y Comunicación (UBA). Practitioner of contact improvisation dance since 2004, she graduated from Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA).
E-mail: marielasing@hotmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0859-817X

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