

Performance Assemblies Publics

Contact Improvisation as Landmark

by Jeremiah Day

Not mere empirical differences but a shift in the basis for proceeding to make the work ... such different assumptions, motives, responses, and results do more than raise aesthetic issues as to what art can be. They raise moral questions, as well, as to where art should be, and who should own it, and how it should be used.

... the assumption that there is something especially relevant to and open for the public in these projects, that they defend an aggressive, non-elitist, an even anti-museum stance, while at the same time counting as advanced art.

—Robert Morris on the site-specific art commissioned by King County, Washington, 1979

Mike Kelley once told me, when I asked if his rock band was art, that there was folk art and *art* art. Yes, he replied, Destroy All Monsters was art, but it was folk art, which depends upon fulfilling preconceived competencies. “Can you carve a good duck?” he said. “Does it look like a duck? If I give you some wood, can you make something look like a duck? OK, good job! Can you play ‘Satisfaction’ on the electric guitar? Rrrmph rrrah. OK, good job!” *Art* art (or maybe he said fine art, I’m not sure) isn’t concerned with that. “There’s a question or an argument,” he said. There’s a point to it.

But who answers *art* art’s questions, who hears its arguments?

Julia Robinson, in her forthcoming book on George Brecht, is developing the concept of an active spectator, which seems to me to go beyond questions of refined taste or connoisseurship. In the context of a class led by John Cage, and the extent to which Cage had deskilled musical composition and performance, Brecht coined the term “virtuoso listener” to describe how art’s public might be able to experience its own capacities in the act of beholding.

So, is the public not just a consumer of such culture? This assumption has supported the argument, and others like it, that art institutions are fundamentally part of the marketplace, a place for consuming goods and services.

Simone Forti introduced me to what I would call an anti-consumerist mode of culture: the public as co-producer of meaning. In workshops, she often uses the structure of “simultaneous solos” — two people soloing in the same space at the same time, two arcs unfolding from independent intentions — that the public cannot help but integrate into one performance and thus complete the work of composing the piece. In this model, the whole work is never present for the performers, who focus each on their own “real-time composition.” No product has been fabricated to be consumed and instead, a process unfolds, offering the public an active role, they are the only ones pulling the piece together. And, the kind of associative, nonliteral vocabulary that Forti draws from gesture and movement-sketches (via Anne Halprin, I believe) is often called

“evocative.” Watching it, something in one’s own memory or imagination is evoked, summoned forth in response to the work in a silent dialogue.

Does the public inform the performance, the performer, as it is informed? Dialogues are inherently two-way, and in some forms, the public cannot help but be structurally involved by the nature of their role. Robert Morris, in reflecting on site-specificity, argued that this new work indeed had a commemorative aspect, but “not commemorative of great events or people; neither is it narrative in the illustrative sense. Rather, it is commemorative of one or another of the various aspects of the site itself.”

In 1972, Pharoah Sanders wanted to make a recording of his live sessions at The East, a Brooklyn cultural center connected to the Black Nationalism movement. Atlantic Records determined this was not possible (budgetary limitations were doubtfully the sole reason preventing the label from documenting this cultural moment), and Sanders responded by bringing the community of The East to Manhattan to join him in Atlantic Records’ recording studio. The album “Live From The East” refers not to a building but a public.

Contact Improvisation emerged from this same matrix of issues: the question of technique and the role of the artist and art in public life. Steve Paxton (and Simone Forti and others) found themselves working in dance at a moment in the 1960s when what they wanted from and to do with it was no longer concerned with technical competency but something else altogether. This new kind of engagement of the medium perhaps makes the work—dance from the period of the Judson Dance Theater—of such relevant interest to those in the visual arts right now: the group confronted the post-technical problem that is central to the visual arts, but in totally different, unexpected ways. Improvisation, collaboration, and the organization of new forms of supporting and making art public would come to play a central role in developing this something else.

They also confronted another issue: power. Paxton had over the course of his work accumulated a broad base of experience with techniques and approaches to working with the body—from training with Merce Cunningham, to gymnastics, to improvisational work with Grand Union, to martial arts—but one role that he did not wish to explore was what he called “the dictatorship of the choreographer.” Standing at the front of the room ordering the group “no, not like that” and “ah, yes, but more like this” was not a position he wanted to take.

Such an idea resonates with the classic political conception of *isonomia*: real freedom is not just rejecting the yoke of being ruled but the role of being a ruler as well. George Hoar, an anti-imperialist in the United States Senate in the late nineteenth century, described this position in his broadside against overseas military expansion: a “free people” are those who “do not bow the neck nor bend at the knee to any other, and who desire no other to bow at the neck or bend at the knee to them.”

The story goes that Yvonne Rainer was so unhappy with the power that leading the Yvonne Rainer Dance Company entailed that she left the company in the middle of a national tour. Rainer’s group—which included Paxton, Trisha Brown, and others who are less heralded but certainly not lacking in capacity—decided to continue on and, rather than perform her pieces, improvise as the newly formed Grand Union.

Paxton carried this power problem further: how do you teach without this dictatorship of the choreographer? In works like *Satisfying Lover*, Paxton's vocabulary is concerned with such fundamental physical movements and properties—sitting, standing, walking—that it has an anti-virtuosic, democratic aspect. (Worth noting is Sally Banes's title for her book about Judson Church: *Democracy's Body*.) *Satisfying Lover* presents people and their forms, not “bodies” really, but people declared in the space. How to teach dance (or art) from this vocabulary of standing and walking?

In my own teaching of performance, when I want to introduce a group to an experience of their own capacity, skeleton, and musculature, I use exercises from Contact Improv to foster a sense of one's own structure and another's in turn. The choreographer Sarah Swenson, who taught me Contact Improvisation at the “Jam” in Los Angeles, once told me that if she'd practiced Contact Improv earlier, she never would have gotten divorced. The practice had taught her, she said, how to listen to herself and someone else at the same time. Further, in Contact Improv, to lose control of one's own structure is to likely injure someone else: to take responsibility for another, one must take responsibility for oneself. “I never would have married him, or I would have figured out how to make it work if I'd know how to do that.”

Akin to David Hammons's street corner assemblage improvisation documented by Barbara McCullough, Swenson used to gather with other dancers and improvise in public spaces in Los Angeles.

Contact Improvisation—while now often called a kind of dance-sport (“It's like inventing skiing,” Simone Forti once said)—has a life of its own all over the world through people who gather and improvise in self-organized “jams,” but still the form refuses to stabilize into “recreation” or even a “social dance.” Whereas Happenings, Earthworks, Mail Art, and Fluxus all aimed to establish a cultural form outside of conventional art institutions and failed, Contact Improvisation succeeded in establishing that “relevant,” “open,” and “advanced” public art that Robert Morris once ascribed to works of land reclamation.

The videos here reflect the landscape around Contact Improv, one filled precisely with such aesthetic and “moral questions.” In the gap between experimental modes of production and reception, at the edge of professional institutions, new models form where the public is, strictly speaking, not consumers. From art as part of ecology (which we now know better to involve political confrontation with the status quo), to cultural self-defense, to existentialist reflection, the glancing windows into these self-organized forms reveals a common ethos: culture as part of public life and as cooperative, collaborative, with mutual respect and support, where one takes care of oneself and the other at the same time.

—*Jeremiah Day*

Jeremiah Day hosts an open weekly performance workshop at K77, Berlin. He is represented by Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam, and Arcade, London. In 2020, he will present a travelling exhibition in partnership with Badische Kunstverein, Karlsruhe; Villa Romana, Florence; Centre d'art Le LAIT, Albi, France; and *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part of Your Revolution*, Amsterdam.

Preview image: Still from Nancy Stark Smith and Steve Paxton, Fall after Newton, contact improvisation, 1972–83.