

## CI (embodied) interrogates its own history

by Karen Nelson

*CI (embodied) interrogates its own history*, a 2017 performance event previously called *The History of Contact Improvisation through the Body*, came to life because of an invitation, an election of a president, an evolving dance form, a roster of Seattle Festival of Dance Improvisation's (SFDI) diverse faculty—inclusive of people of color, queer, trans, abled and disabled, white, cis women and men, to name several general identity categories—and my own white, cis woman eyes opening to the fact that people of color were not visible in the earliest CI archival video footage.

I was invited by SFDI organizers to show, for a third year, *The History of Contact Improvisation through the Body*, a lecture-demonstration performed with variations in 2015 and 2016. Both versions had pickup casts of experienced CI dancers, most of whom were white, with the exception of one man of color. *History* meant a talk, live dancing, and some videos. Specifically, the talk was woven around introducing videos, such as *Chute*, the classic documentary about the 1972 original research and debut performances of the newly named Contact Improvisation dance form. *Chute* contains images of men and women dancers exploring raw, unknown pathways in, around, and on each other, discovering a freedom to improvise with the physical forces.

The pithy and informative narration of *Chute* by choreographer Steve Paxton, Contact Improvisation's founder, who is white, lays out the physical ideas behind the simple and wild, ordinary and fantastic, playfully athletic, and meditative actions of the form that remind us of countless human interactions and animals enjoying their bodies moving in concert with others. Many first-time viewers of *Chute*, especially those who already practice Contact Improvisation, are often wowed by this introduction to the roots of the form.



photo © Bill Arnold

Karen Nelson [left] and Steve Paxton during a CI performance at Naropa Institute (now University), Boulder, CO, 1984.

*History* continued with a viewing of *Magnesium*, a performance of pre-Contact dance material choreographed by Paxton and performed with a group of men—students at Oberlin College—early in 1972. In both the 2015 and 2016 shows, a live group dance that I titled *Unimaginable* segued out of the video.

When invited by SFDI in 2017 to offer another iteration of *History*, I was both excited and determined to meet the moment. That moment included the post-election U.S. not-my-president, reports of increased numbers of hate crimes, widespread resistance movements, and my own activism and racial awareness kicking in. SFDI curators, a multiracial group gathered annually by Velocity Dance Center director Tonya Lockyer, have cultivated a diverse faculty and curriculum over many years; 2017 proved to be an exceptional year in that regard, honoring many styles of dance improvisation with influences from pop culture,

political activism, indigenous ritual, mixed abilities, gender exploration, Contact, dance witchery, butoh, felt experience, the void, and more. Teachers from many walks and identities filled the schedule.

I realized that here was an opportunity to include skilled improvisers from a broad range of personal locations or “histories, oppressions, and privileges”—a phrase I borrow from Christopher-Rasheem McMillan’s article in *CQ* 42.2, 2017. I reached out to SFDI faculty months in advance of the festival to explain my view to potential collaborators who had some experience with CI and was generously received. Questioning my inherited white bias and other oppressions by the dominant culture, my intention grew to “interrogate” this impactful dance form in which I have located myself for many decades. The new title, *CI (embodied) interrogates its own history*, eventually emerged.

In gathering materials for *CI (embodied)*, in addition to the archival CI footage, I was drawn to add several influences throughout the piece for our consideration. *CI (embodied)* began with three simultaneous events: a live trio Contact dance, a recitation of my article “Touch Revolution: Giving Dance” (*CQ* 21.1, 1996), and a silent video projection of *In the Break* (2013)—a creative intervention dance by mayfield brooks and myself as part of mayfield’s ongoing project *Improvising While Black* (documented in *CQ* 41.1, 2016). Just as the live dance and text ended, the

volume came up on the video. Two faces, mayfield’s and my own, filled the frame. mayfield was saying the words “post racial,” and I showed visible delight in that term. mayfield went on to kindly explain the problem with the term and the condition of color blindness.

*CI (embodied)* continued with a viewing of *Chute* and was followed by a video excerpt of Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland performing a duet as part of Contact at 10th & 2nd—Contact Improvisation’s 11th Anniversary Festival, curated by Paxton in New York City in 1983.

Before showing an excerpt of Ishmael and Fred’s duet, I read aloud their score for the dance, which they had kept private at the time:

Fred and Ishmael’s “*Wrong*” *Contact Manifesto 1983*:

*We are Black.*

*We will wear our “street” clothes (as opposed to sweats).*

*We will wear heavy shoes, Fred, construction boots /  
Ishmael, Army.*

*We will talk to one another while dancing.*

*We will fuck with flow and intentionally interrupt one  
another and ourselves.*

*We will use a recorded music score—loud looping  
of sounds from Kung Fu movies by Mark  
Allen Larson.*

*We will stay out of physical contact much of the time.*



Still from video by mayfield brooks and Karen Nelson

Karen Nelson [left] and mayfield brooks during *In the Break with Karen Nelson—a Creative INtervention*, a full day of dance and discussion curated by mayfield brooks, University of California at Davis, San Francisco, CA, 2013. Dance excerpt available at <https://vimeo.com/85012273S>.

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By including Fred and Ishmael’s work in context with CI archival footage, *CI (embodied)* offered an instance of dancers of color responding artistically to the Contact scene of the era.

*Unimaginable*, the culminating group dance in *CI (embodied)*, was inspired by Paxton’s 2015 comment from “Why Standing?” (CQ 40.1): “There was a time when Contact Improvisation was not even really imaginable.” He was referring to CI’s early work, the practice of standing and training the reflexes to deal with the forces of gravity, falling, and momentum before there was an inkling of a duet form. I had nurtured my way into CI over the decades, magnetized by Steve’s original proposals; *Magnesium*, which I had screened and studied for 35 years, suddenly played for me as a bunch of white guys jumping and falling around. *Unimaginable*’s score made visible the research that *CI (embodied)* hoped to explore by including dancers who were not only those who are white and athletic. The dance, as before, emerged out of a screening of *Magnesium*.

Watching *Magnesium* is, for me, akin to getting drunk on it. My nervous system fires away as I guzzle it in: the ambient soundtrack of crashing bodies on mats and the old gym floor; the grainy black-and-white images; the simple, physical, childlike explorations these men are doing—swinging their arms until their bodies fall over, spinning, running, and jumping, dead falls to the ground—as well as the interactions between the men—a pull, a lean, a push. They go on and on, ending finally with several minutes of standing, as Paxton said, “to mark a contrast to the high-energy movement.” After taking a dose of watching *Magnesium*, my dancing becomes a transmission of that energy.

In the *CI (embodied)* version of *Unimaginable*, we emphasized one of Paxton’s guiding questions, “What can a body do to survive?” Survival and personal safety became a meaningful lens as each dancer located them-

selves within their own “histories, oppressions, and privileges.” Fifteen dancers entered the space to stand, joining the image of the *Magnesium* dancers projected on the back wall, all simply standing—a field of corn stalks, a herd of elk, or a dreamscape of humans being—until the video went dark. Two musicians also entered the space. Our main dance score was allowing movement to grow out of the stand by following our reflexive balancing as we navigated dancing in a large group.

Midway through *Unimaginable*, a 2012 video of dance activist Keith Hennessy’s talking head appears on the wall, adding his voice to the live music. Keith, who is white, addressed CI teacher and developer Nancy Stark Smith (not present in the video), also white, with a long list of questions, including her current interests in dancing, aging, race, gender, sex, the politics of CI festivals and CI tourism in the context of a global economy and international network, as well as energy and magic.

Dave Knott, one of the musicians, wrote of his participation:

*Alternating now between somewhat declarative and room-dominating sound gestures to the baseline movement listener/resonator/amplifier—it seems what is called for. The warm up chat included suggestions for more excessive approaches, risk and wildness. So much to pay attention to—I could just sit here and listen for a while. Questions bouncing around the room, crossing vectors of form, culture, gender, race... is this the interrogation? So much going on now, layers of past and present in the video and on the floor.*

From my dancing perspective, when the standing began I dropped into my body. I suddenly wanted to know if keyon gaskin (who goes by the pronoun “they”) had

joined the group or if they had decided not to participate in an act of last minute protest. I opened my eyes; to my right and slightly behind me I saw them, dark-skinned in a white T-shirt, leaning against the brick wall, head bowed over like a question mark. The image caused a collision between my reflexes and my expectations. I was relieved to see they had joined and yet startled to see their powerful choice of leaning rather than following the proposal of standing freely on two legs. The curve of their head evoked a feeling of tired or worn. The leaning made me think of the desire for support. The image was powerful and energizing, raising an emotional response in me.

When I began moving, I found myself propelled to the periphery. There I noticed Hilary Clark, a white dancer, large and bold. A strong connection to inner physical-emotional experiences fueled her dance as she interacted with the curtains on the mirror and used hand gesturing to define space, as if casting magic spells. At one point, she opened the curtain, revealing the room and all of us in reflection, a startling and poetic answer to the many questions coming to us from the sound of Keith's gently insistent voice.

Several of the more avid CI dancers traveled the space, engaged with charged physicality, jumping, falling, and rolling, sustaining high-speed CI duets, trios, and larger group interactions. An audience member sensitive to the difficulties of including non-dominant viewpoints later reported experiencing emotional discomfort in what she perceived as brutal interruptions by some of the "serious" CI dancers toward the others, who were in a different flow, timing, and intensity of focus.

As I danced between periphery and center, passing through other moving forces, I saw a young woman, who

newly identifies as a person of color, on her feet, soloing in the mix of swirling traveling bodies. Her pelvis and spine were circling to an inaudible rhythm. I also noticed Syniva Whitney, an artist of color who values a non-binary view and goes by the pronoun "they," was dancing close to the floor, gently and slowly. They became a kind of visual anchor for me. They joined in duet with keyon. Their sustained low, slow movement countered the whirl of momentum around them. Soon, they seemed to draw focus, magnetizing others toward them in space. I recall reaching to touch pointer fingers with keyon, each of us with intention, momentarily bridging the groups we were involved in and punctuating the voice of Keith speaking about racial diversity in CI. The rhythm of the touch was one beat and felt to me like a gesture of goodwill.

More from Dave:

*I hear a sound, loud but distant. I imagine a new club must have moved in nearby and the sound is bleeding into this space. Then slowly I realize that one of the dancers had turned on a recording in the next room and has now flung open the door and there are other dancers joining them in that "other" room, moving with the deep, bassy rhythms. This is club music, this is hip-hop and heavy; a voice pumps out word rhythms. But what is this sound doing here? Next layer of listening—the echoes of the questions around "Why are there not more people of color involved in this CI dance?" I feel so white all of a sudden, this recorded music that is playing that so many dancers seem to be enjoying—beats, solid and heavy, carving its space right*

Still from video by Keith Hennessy



Keith Hennessy in *Keith Hennessy Talks to Nancy Stark Smith*, a video with prerecorded questions for a live interview with Nancy Stark Smith in Berkeley, CA, December 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0CtXbpErYs>



Ishmael Houston-Jones [*stripes*] and Fred Holland performing their untitled piece—which they later referred to as “Untitled Duet (or Oo-Ga-La)” —at Contact at 10th & 2nd, Contact Improvisation’s 11th Anniversary Festival, Danspace Project, NYC, 1983. <https://vimeo.com/114657723>

*here. Was the music I was playing not right? But here is a sound field-of-color now brought in by a dancer and it is happening—the question is being answered, or asked in a different way in the present, with this recording brought in by an inspired dancer taking a chance and throwing open a door to ask it. I sit and listen. What does this moment require of me—with my instruments, materials, my other music collaborator on this gig?*

With recorded music emanating from the adjacent studio, dancers began flowing in and out of both spaces. Our periphery expanded. Katherine Cook, an experienced and physically rigorous CI dancer who is white, reported that the duet she was involved in during the hip-hop music intervention became even more focused and held itself to the central area of the original space. This moment caused for her a felt-awareness of intersecting cultures for the first time in the group dance.

Following the performance, I reflected back on the question of survival. I was curious to learn what each participant’s survival strategy had been. I was surprised to feel that my own usual focus of highly pleasurable physical movement became diverted toward a warming interest in what the others were doing—how were they living through these conditions?

Crammed into a busy festival, this performance of *Unimaginable* had no rehearsal other than a pre-show warm-up in which I gave my questions and suggestions and we moved together for the first time. We then

launched into performance energy, and it seemed that most people migrated toward their most pleasurable mode of survival and managed their way through less comfortable and possibly fearful moments. Sharing these conditions together offered intense, edgy-in-the-moment, even joyful opportunities for high-energy, chaotic, and messy-good improvising.

A positive outcome of this experiment for me is to consider practices for future gatherings. As a facilitator or a participant, I intend to bring questions of personal safety that embrace awareness of difference. Given the chance, I would ask, “Is there anything you would like me or us to know for your safety?” Recognizing the variety of identities—racial, gender, sexual, and physical ability—alive in us humans, with our differing “histories, oppressions, and privileges,” is to make room for another’s difference. I can’t assume to know what makes someone safe; I can only ask the question and share in the pursuit.



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*I am grateful to many generous people who through their dancing, speaking, listening, writing, witnessing, and ultimately sharing human connection, have supported this CI (embodied) interrogates its own history project and article. Waking up is hard to do and harder to talk about. [K.N.]*