

## SARA SHELTON MANN:



## In the Presence of Action

Writings orchestrated by  
Anya Cloud and Karen Schaffman  
through conversation, laughter,  
and dancing with Sara Shelton Mann

**S**ara Shelton Mann grew up in rural Tennessee. At age 17, arts, politics, and culture collided for her under one roof at Shorter College in Georgia. “I was just a southern hick running away from the people I grew up with. Franziska Boas, a queer German-Jewish woman, a professor who was wanted by the Ku Klux Klan, was my lifeline.” At the advice of Franziska, Sara moved to New York City with \$500 in her pocket to study with Alwin Nikolais in order to become, as Sara calls it, “a complete professional.” And she did. At the age of 74, Sara is a blazing force; she is actively and ardently researching, choreographing, performing, and teaching.

## Unraveling the Technique of Implied Direction

Drawing on the breadth and depth of her moving history, filtered through her own singular genius, Sara Shelton Mann developed a body of teaching work that rigorously trains artists through compositional puzzles, energetic realms, writing, physical contact, and working with what she calls the “imagination muscles.” These, and more, are vibratory-based techniques, and the dancers who have trained with her over time are, well, *charged*.

What does a class with Sara look like? It includes Scramble Technique, Chi Cultivation, and Research of the Day. Through this framework, Sara relentlessly clarifies, articulates, and complicates the concepts at hand. Class is extraordinarily demanding. Sara’s pedagogy is as technical as it is elusive. The speed and complexity of the material can make it feel like superhero training camp.

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Anya Cloud [left] and Sara Shelton Mann in *Eye of Leo: The Gathering*, directed by Sara Shelton Mann at the Joe Goode Annex, San Francisco, CA, August 2016.

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Implied Direction was a survival technique for performance, to stay in the body and anchor spirit inside the breath. [S.S.M]

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In the early 1980s, Sara created Implied Direction, one of her many techniques. This is a fundamental and evolving practice in Sara's work as a teacher and choreographer. She discovered it through entering her breath with the weight of her hands on her own body. "It was a way of warming up. I was finding the flow of energy through the joint capsules through deep touch. It was a survival technique for performance, to stay in the body and anchor spirit inside the breath."

Implied Direction is a hands-on technique that opens pathways. It tunes the hands to interact with the breath and the structures of the body systems. This technique can be applied to oneself or to another person's body.

As a duet form, Implied Direction requires that each person take a different role—"sender" or "receiver."

**Sender:** The sender initiates touch with one hand at a time. The intention for direction moves from the center (or heart) of the sender, not from the hand alone. It is direct touch that listens into the rhythm of the receiver and has the potential to enter many physical and energetic layers/levels of the receiver's body. The quality of touch is non-manipulative, deep, and soft without being personal.

**Receiver:** The receiver moves in response to and in conversation with this touch. What emerges is *ACTIVE SURRENDER*: aha dancing via uncharted pathways. It can feel like soft lightning or the northern lights moving through the body.

**The Nitty Gritty:** Touching the lower arm between the radius and ulna bones, in the center of the tissue, is one of the clearest places to start finding pathways through the joints. It is a means of sensing where the tissue is resistant or lax. It involves what Sara calls "rolling the bones." This awakens the lines of energy that pass through the joints

and removes blockages, which allows for multidirectional energy through the limbs. The intention of the direction can go up, down, horizontal, diagonal, toward the elbow, toward the hand, and/or spiraling. Then you can reverse the energy with the opposite direction. "It is like turning a screw." Implied Direction can be routed in any direction at any moment. Rebound comes into play. Then, timing. This trains a dancer's ability to interrupt momentum and redirect to new pathways that shift the rhythm and weight choices.

While the technique starts in the intimate field (kinesphere), Implied Direction can move through space. There is no end point. It slows down time, which allows for space to open. As the exchange develops, the movement cycles back and forth between sender and receiver, so that the dance doesn't lose energy.

**Sara Magnifies:** "Although the touch is in one area, the sender senses the whole system. It's not like looking at the anatomy and saying, I'll touch the ventricles of the heart. You can choose to move into the interim spaces. For example, larger or smaller points of contact might affect a single vertebra, a space between the ribs, or the whole pelvis. The intention is to be clear with what layer (considering energetic and physical fields of existence) you are touching, so that the receiver responds from his or her depth of field. It is like unraveling an onion. I have a hunch that Implied Direction is like a river through the meridians. You move into the river between stories in the body. You ride the rapids of internal space, finding ways through the other person, spiraling into the floor and up into the air. What goes down doesn't necessarily come back up. That would be an example of *finite weight* rather than what I call *infinite weight*. The applications are endless. As it evolves, it talks to you, teases you into the rules of engagement on its own terms." ➤

# Implied Direction:

## Gathering and Unraveling

photo © Robbie Sweeney



Anya Cloud and Sara Shelton Mann in *Eye of Leo: The Gathering*, directed by Sara Shelton Mann at the Joe Goode Annex, San Francisco, CA, August 2016.

### **The Gathering**

*The Gathering* was the culminating work from Sara's *Eye of Leo Series* (2012–16). This evening-length work included Sara applying her Implied Direction technique with soloist/collaborator Anya Cloud in performance. Karen Schaffman participated in a dramaturgical role. Three perspectives reflecting on Implied Direction in *The Gathering*:

Sara – Director: Sending

*I'm entering the flesh of Anya's body as she is describing the excavation of a dead rabbit. There is an awareness of both holding and molding the origin of life. You want to make sure not to drop the water—the jug will crack. And you will hurt your friend (Sara starts to cry while sharing this). In this instance, the touch is light like a feather. And that is what is appropriate for this particular text, as it is the antidote to the image of dissecting a dead animal.*

Karen – Witness: Perceiving

*Anya balances on a small mountain. It seems impossible. She bridges worlds—awakens the imagination. These are not images but events. Raw. Electric states. Shudders. Smooth pathways into spills. Sara and Anya tune to each other's touch. It is like a labyrinth. Then the beast emerges—there is no telling where Anya will go. Onward!*

Anya – Performer: Receiving

*I'm reading the death text and crying when Sara's piercingly present hand touches me. Whoosh! It is an intimate and immediate contract with Sara that opens my body; information (past, present, future) moves through me into my dancing. I become flayed. I am physically exhausted, emotionally vulnerable, and acutely aware of massive human capacity. This vessel, my body, is igniting. Holy shit. Implied Direction asks for everything—as a grounded and precarious platform, it manifests in a range of states from density to total transparency. It moves through me, and I am changed.*

## Sara Shelton Mann: History & Influences

*This endeavor began as an interview with Sara Shelton Mann by Angela Guerreiro and Karen Schaffman, collaborators for The Live Legacy Project (a project of TanzFonds Erbe) in 2013. It was transcribed and redacted by Luke Forbes and Karen Schaffman. This final iteration was orchestrated into meaning and further developed by Anya Cloud, Sara Shelton Mann, and Karen Schaffman.*



[Left to right] Carolyn Carlson, Alwin Nikolais, Sara Shelton Mann, Jeanette Stoner, and Wanda Pruska on tour in Yugoslavia in the late 1960s.

### **Karen Schaffman and Anya Cloud:**

*Where shall we begin?*

**Sara Shelton Mann:** I trained as a professional dancer in New York City at the Henry Street Playhouse with Alwin Nikolais. I was in his and Murray Louis's company. I also trained at the Cunningham School and with Erick Hawkins and Nancy Meehan. This was the time of the Modern Masters.

While I was hell-bent on being a technical dancer, Judson Church was happening across town. I would go and see the performances and I would say, "What? What? What?" I saw Trisha Brown walking on the wall and Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* in a movie theater on 2nd Avenue. Those artists had an extraordinary influence on me.

With Nikolais, we went from two hours of technique to two hours of improvisation every day, with composition three times per week. Each day was something else: time, space, shape, motion, arms, legs, motor, repetition. Everything was based in the weight bounce, the over-curve and under-curve. We taught kids, learned drumming and lighting. It was a full plate. Nik never worked with counts; he just stood at the drum. (Murray worked with counts.) I'm sure he put us all in a trance. He didn't demonstrate; we had to learn how to do the steps from his voice. Nik said, "The motion is the emotion." There was a competition between dancers to see who could figure out what he wanted and go further with the material. We had the run of the studios. The company members also created work on each other. We always felt we were in the discovery place. That's where I got the unknown. We felt we were on the verge of some essential truth that would be revealed. It's the way that I teach now.

The experiences I had performing with Nik in Europe were to die for. There was no such thing as takeout or the corner store in Europe. We ate with full silver and candles on the beach in Italy. Dined in the opium dens of Yugoslavia. I got to go to Monte Carlo. The diamonds...the gambling...the Roulette Room! Nik's French impresario

made the money at the gambling table. And then we went to dinner, and I danced with Jean-Pierre Rampal (the renowned flutist). I made more money dancing with Nik than I do now.

*What was the next major shift for you as an artist?*

At some point I knew that I had to leave New York and work in isolation. I had to know who was making the work—me or the city? I had to create a new form, a language that worked for me.

I was hired by the Halifax Dance Co-op in Nova Scotia, Canada, to create a professional modern dance company. When I first moved there it was all outsiders and Winnebagos, dead fish, bar peanuts, and alcohol. I began to receive respect and funding for my work. They kept kicking me out of the country because I was there illegally, so I spent all the money I made traveling back and forth to New York. Finally, I was granted immigrant status.

I was very lonely in Halifax. It was cold! I ended up working across Canada. People worked in galleries and warehouses. It was alternative work. Writers came out, visual artists came out, performers came out, photographers came out, and everybody talked about the work. It's where I got my interdisciplinary chops. Gallery spaces taught me how to construct and deconstruct one aspect at a time. If you wanted to light the space, you had to figure it out. Everything was bare. There was no fantasy. I've gone back to that empty space, the arena. This affects my work today. It's one part conceptual, one part visual, one part emptiness, which allows for a kinesthetic to read it in a very stark way. There is also Grace.

Along the way, I met Jennifer Mascal, who was a ballet dancer, and we toured Canada together. We performed in the grass in a gallery with petunias taken from the bank, and we were strapped to the underbelly of opposite sides



Sara Shelton Mann

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[S.S.M.]

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of a seesaw. I could have killed myself! I've done a lot of crazy things. I did a shaking solo for 45 minutes, where all I did was throw myself against the floors and walls.

*Did this kind of experimentation lead you to Contact Improvisation?*

Andrew Harwood and Helen Clark came to Halifax to perform. I watched her roll around his shoulders and my eyes popped out, my tongue fell out of my mouth, and I went, "I'm in heaven—what is that?" And so I began studying Contact with Andrew and Peter Bingham at the Western Front in Vancouver. I used to fall and cry and fall and cry. It's amazing for a professional dancer to learn Contact. Partnering is quite different. I was a technique freak, with the legs up in the air and extended joints. I fell in love with Contact...the two worlds didn't go together at all.

Actually, my first Contact class was with Danny Lepkoff in New York City. In one class, Danny had us "doing nothing." In another class, he had someone bend over like a post in the center of the room. And then he did a barrel roll over them, and then you were supposed to do it next. I couldn't figure out how people chose partners. Like social dancing? I didn't understand the rules of the form. How do you start a dance? How do you know what to do? What in you does *what* to start a dance?

Contact became the metaphor for all of my work. I took a few classes with Nancy Stark Smith, and met Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton. I remember that East Coast Contact and West Coast Contact were completely different.

*Who else was most influential on the development of your work?*

I studied with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen in the 1970s, and she affected me in terms of the systems of the body. Bonnie gave me a language that included both the voice and the integrity of the movement. The transmission was profound! Later, I studied with another genius, Hameed Ali. It was called the Diamond Approach. Each year we did a full retreat based on a theme, such as Autonomy, the Wild Child, and the Pearl beyond Price.

*How did you land in San Francisco?*

I met Mangrove [an all-male dance collective working from Contact Improvisation] at their intensive "Cutting Edge of the Form" on Vancouver Island. Later I saw them perform, and I said to my friend, "I'm going to marry that man Byron Brown." And I did. Freddy Long was also there, and she began a relationship with John LeFan, also of Mangrove. Freddy and I were invited to move to San Francisco and be the first, and only, women to join Mangrove. And that was the beginning of the end.

*And, *Contraband*?*

*Contraband* was my research ground from 1984 to 1996. We started in the Mangrove studio and then changed the scale to Project Artaud, the big industrial theater upstairs. With *Contraband*, I wanted to create a performance school and research group integrating what I learned from Nik, interdisciplinary training in Canada, Contact, Bonnie, and Hameed. I was seeking a language that I felt came from the body that had integrity, ethics, and technique, and included the evolution of the artist

and person. Everybody sang; everybody wrote; everybody did personal process, worked outdoors, and made images. So all the artists were on the same page. I remember Keith Hennessy and I sat down and made an agreement. He said, "I will never work under a traditional director unless I have veto power over what I do." I said, "I would never work in a collective." So, Contraband worked from this mix of differences. People entered the process with different skills, personalities, and agendas. Through that process, I could see who was good at what and how to edit the work.

Looking back, Contraband was also a training in ideas, concepts and artistic questions. How do you train someone technically from an improvisational research basis?

*Can you talk about how you see Contact Improvisation as technical?*

By treating Contact as a technical skill, I discovered the Chi body. Intention is there before touch. I explored the metaphor of falling; from the bones, the muscles, the nervous system. What's going on in the navel and the brain, the back heart, the front heart, how the knees release, the organs, all these things? I began to explore and explore. What is direct? What is indirect? What is it to truly lead? To truly follow? What is what I call the "bleed space" between people? How do you create clarity and not be half in your body and half in somebody else's body? Or, are you waiting in the interim space? How many different textures are there? The point of contact should not be the "yummy" object. If your attention is with the point of contact only, then you have vacated your body. What you are thinking comes through the touch. When you touch

somebody, you're actually anchoring them. If you know what anchoring is, you have a tremendous power in Contact. (If you don't know what anchoring is, you are still anchoring.) Either you match your partner's hesitation or you can anchor a state of potential. Partners are looking for the common denominator, which is rhythm.

A couple of things collide here. I'm a master Neuro-Linguistic Programming™ (NLP) practitioner, and I studied dowsing and several healing modalities. I began to see the application of NLP and Contact. We have a good side and a bad side. You start talking to someone, you're negotiating which side they're on, and you do the same thing in dancing. So if you're on somebody's bad side, it's cold. They're going to negotiate for the good side for the dance. It's fucking hilarious. I began to explore all of these theories in Contact. What is it to be personal as opposed to being impersonal? Who's visual? Who's kinesthetic? Who's auditory? Who talks to themselves to make things happen? It all became wonderful territory. I apply this research to break patterns in the dance artists that I work with.

I became really possessed and passionate about the study of energy in space, more than what the body is actually doing. What you are transmitting is actually thought. One example is Implied Direction. It's exquisite to have very trained bodies playing with this technique.

I choreographed the *Eye of Leo* series of solos working with this approach, and with the emotional body, to create form. It's a spiritual journey without a linear path. It's a puzzle. I "live direct" and work as the provocateur. I create a very specific arena that the performer steps into. It's digging into the inner workings of the person, both the ascended aspects and the shadows, and twisting and turning those without turning it into drama, without "performing" it. It's done perfectly with complete consciousness. The performer is being witnessed and seen, yet is completely alone at the same time. We are talking about consciousness without agenda or judgment—to strip that away and be in the presence of action. Because I've studied so many practices and healing trainings, it's important to be in the stark reality of the physical. So what if everything is actually very physical? That removes the separation between me-spirit and me-body. So I become more of a conduit and care less about me.

***Sara's next choreographic project, Echo, will premiere in San Francisco in 2018.***



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Sara Shelton Mann performing a clearing solo that Remy Charlip taught her, in Contraband's *The Mira Cycles: Mira II* (1991), directed by Sara Shelton Mann, Theater Artaud, San Francisco, CA, 1991.

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