

# What is Contact Improvisation? the uniqueness of a syncretistic dance form

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## What is the problem? Do we need this question 'What is Contact Improvisation?'

People, who are actively engaged in this dance form, have usually a rather clear sense of what Contact Improvisation is. But when we try to explain to outsiders (those 99 % of our society), what we are doing, we realize that it is not so clear what Contact Improvisation actually is. The other common situation for this question to pop up is on Jams or other CI events, when we are frustrated about what's happening there. Suddenly we realize that practitioners have very different ideas what CI is and diverging needs they want to get satisfied by the practice or the connected environment.

I personally suffer from the negative image CI has among most professional contemporary dancers. Contact Improvisation easily appears as a shapeless under toned movement practice, where people get lost in sensations and unclear boundaries. From my point of view and practice this is a fatal misinterpretation, which shows one specific and maybe dubious/ questionable/ dodgy development of the form.

I am fascinated that CI is highly specific and unique whilst being at the same time extremely open for the communication with other disciplines and the integration of new knowledge. And both poles have the potential to strengthen each other.

Contact Improvisation is not copyrighted. There is no binding definition of what CI is. The founders who could have given this clarity decided to keep it as free ware, something like nowadays computer system software UNIX, where everyone who knows the code (and is smart enough) can contribute to make it better. CI is syncretistic. It merges aspects of different or even diverging systems and shapes it into something new. Already in the beginning it combined knowledge from martial arts, sports, modern dance techniques and Zen meditation. The influences have become even broader. Body-mind-centering and other somatic approaches, Release Techniques, Capoeira, Tango Argentino, authentic movement, therapeutic approaches left their footprints.

Contact Improvisation has an astounding capacity to integrate knowledge from all kinds of disciplines and to benefit from this information. There are more and more dance events that combine CI with other practices like Tango, SM, contemporary dance, somatic work, voice, theatre... The jam is supposed to become a melting pot of all disciplines. That can be fantastic or disturbing. More and more beginners have their first CI experiences in those Contact-mix festivals, where it is less obvious what Contact Improvisation is and what is already a mixture of different things where the boundaries of CI are stretched. That might support the blurriness of the 'label' Contact Improvisation and make the regular contact jams less focussed or safe.

Contact Improvisation is obviously in a rich exchange with other body- mind- and movement-systems. But for a mature dialogue between people as well as among disciplines it is essential that both partners know who they are, what they have to offer and what they keep as their home base. It is not the aim to merge. It is about listening to the other one, getting inspired and to grow without loosing ones identity.

Increasing diversity is probably a problem of all growing social, political or spiritual movements, which are not based on an absolute hierarchy or dogma. All these movements are challenged by becoming too diverse to be *one* – and then potentially break up into different streams or parties. Contact Improvisation has no pope or any kind of committee (?) to give clear directions for the whole community. Instead CI has some diversifying elements as a regular and integral part of its practice.

- It is very normal that teachers have other movement practices next to CI that inform their teaching.
- A sign for a good jam is that it creates a space where very different things can co-exist.
- Jams – as the core frame to practice contact improvisation – potentially work without any music. Even though music makes it much easier to fall into a flow many jam-hosts consciously choose to not use music, because of its power to unify the activities and experiences in the space.
- A common idea for going through a jam is (should be?) to one's own interest and to keep or adjust it while connecting with others (instead of just merging with a partner)

Funnily especially the long term practitioners identify with these diversifying elements of the form. At the same time it is mainly them who fear that CI becomes random, that it dissolves into the ocean of possibilities. There is a sadness or frustration that a practice, which used to be a vital part of their lives, turns into something they don't feel comfortable with any more. They stay away from their local jams because they miss the focus on 'practicing the form'. And as a result the jams loose even more focus and dance quality. It becomes less and less clear what CI essentially is.

But it is remarkable that especially those international events create frames where people want to be able to share the dance with each other, where they are forced to find a common language. Contact Improvisation spread world wide within the western upper middle classes. And still people can share the dance whilst coming from rather different backgrounds.

What are the rules and principles they all consciously or unconsciously share? Is there an Identity of Contact Improvisation? What is the thing that makes Contact Improvisation recognizable? Is there something unique about this highly open dance form?

### **A core proposition for Contact Improvisation**

In 2007 Nancy Starck Smith (one of the co-founders of Contact Improvisation) asked practitioners to come up with 'core propositions of Contact improvisation'. She didn't ask for a definition. She didn't look for an answer that everyone eventually should agree on. She wanted to keep the dialogue alive about 'What is essential for CI? What is the core of this multilayered dance form that benefits so much from the dialogue with other disciplines? What can we not take away from CI without losing the form?'

### **My core proposition for CI**

For my core proposition I was looking towards the early days of Contact Improvisation and I observed what has survived until now (2.). I also acknowledge what else has developed that we all share (1.). And I am trying to name what is unique about Contact Improvisation; that means, which movement and communication options do we find only in CI and in no other movement technique? (2.)

In three words or terms:

Jam – research – shared weight improvisation

In one sentence:

Contact Improvisation is a social dance form  
based on the research  
of the movement possibilities of two people sharing weight

With a little more explanation of what it involves:

1. **Contact Improvisation is a social dance form with the jam as the core setting to practice it.**

Seen from the early days this is a surprising development. A performance exploration develops into a social dance form. The jam as a space where people come together to dance is – in my eyes – a reason, why we can call CI a dance form and not just a physical technique like somatic approaches or release work.

2. **Contact Improvisation is essentially a research.** It is not fixed, movements are not set. Dances, teachings, labs, jams and festivals they all are meant to explore the form and not just to reproduce the common knowledge. That doesn't mean that contacters are supposed to chase the new. Repetition is an essential part of finding trust and learning. But the form is based on a spirit of curiosity and discovery.

3. **The heart of Contact Improvisation is its technique with two connected layers: physical Contact & Improvisation.**

For me 'Contact' stands for the technique around the physical contact. This first layer with the emphasis on the exploration around 'moving the shared weight' gives a uniqueness to the form; something that hasn't been developed in any other discipline.

'Improvisation' stands for the technique of communication and negotiation of the dance partners. This second layer makes Contact Improvisation so easy to connect to many other disciplines and life in general.

Some more depth to my proposal:

**To 1. Contact Improvisation is a social dance form.**

Nowadays the core setting to practice Contact Improvisation is the Jam. People gather in a space for a more or less clear length of time with an often unspoken set of rules. Potentially everyone can dance with everyone. The main idea is to practice Contact Improvisation. But another big motivation is to meet people and to connect also socially. The purists, including me, complain that the focus on the dance is getting lost and that the quality of dances is weaker than it could or should be. On the other hand I have to admit that my life, as someone who makes his money with teaching Contact Improvisation, wouldn't be possible, if there wasn't this broader interest in the form that is so strongly supported by its social aspects.

I assume that – as long as CI exists – there will be an argument about how to run jams. As a part of it many Jams through the years after being set up develop towards more openness while losing in the quality of the dances and eventually they close down. At the same time new, more focussed Jams will be started until the originators move on and the focussed frame dissolves again. Other jams are going through phases with less and more focus.

I am pretty sure that if we purists had the entire control, CI would become a very small thing and maybe even disappear. So I see my part as to give my energy to more focus on the dance in the jams and encourage the socialising to happen later on or outside the dance space. But I see that the space for socialising is essential for the jams to stay alive.

With 'Contact Improvisation is a social dance form' I mean that it includes a social community and the need for socializing, as I just showed. But I also mean it in comparison to other social dance forms, where the main purpose of the dance is not to be performed like in ballet, modern or contemporary dance techniques but to be danced like in Ballroom Dancing, Salsa, Swing or Tango Argentino.

It is almost a surprise that CI became a social dance form. It was (and in a way still is) practiced mainly without music. It started as a physical experiment to create a performance ('Magnesium' in 1972 led by Steve Paxton). It could have developed into a physical performing art. For a while in its highly physical and acrobatic beginnings it was referred to as an arts sport. Maybe it became a dance because the originators were so strongly connected to the dance world and they performed it as a dance piece. The social aspect appeared already in the very beginning in the

research settings.

The original way to practice CI and also to perform it was the round robin, which creates a sort of stage and separates the practitioners into dancers and spectators. This format lost its dominant status in classes and other frames to practice CI. It has the disadvantage that only a few people could dance at the same time. Watching was a main part of the practice, which also created some creative pressure on the dancers. Especially for new-comers this is often very hard in this dance form, where perception got the stronger emphasis than the beauty or excitement of the visual shape.

Instead jams appeared, where everyone could make his or her own decision to dance or to witness the dance. If the space is big enough easily more than hundred people can share the dance at the same time. Contact Improvisation created a format, which is similar to other social dance forms like ball room dancing, Salsa or Tango Argentino. People meet to purely dance together.

Usually the development goes the other way. From the social dance form to the performance. From what I know from Tango Argentino, it wasn't performed in the beginning but only danced in classes and milongas, where performative elements are part of it. Later on it became more normal that the best ones created Tango dances for the stage, where they needed to adjust the dance to this different situation.

On the other hand ballet (and its following generations of modern dance and contemporary dance techniques) kept their focus on being performed. Classes and trainings gave the physical ability. In the rehearsals the piece was developed. But the stage is essentially the frame where the rehearsed steps are meant to be danced. Nowadays many people who take classes in ballet, modern, jazz or contemporary dance don't want to perform it. To practice it is enough. In my understanding of it it seems that most contemporary dance students never find settings to bring their practiced knowledge into pure dancing? They practice a dance but never dance it. How strange.

Only (?) Contact Improvisation made this miraculous way from being a performative dance to becoming a social dance form that can be actually danced.

## **to 2. *Contact Improvisation is essentially a research.***

CI started as a research project. Steve Paxton – as the main founder of the form - left CI apparently because he couldn't connect so well to the developing social environment of the form. He understood CI as a research work that has its appropriate place in a simple studio. But still the spirit of research seems to be characteristic for CI. There is a basic attitude in dancing to invite something new to happen. Contact practitioners are supposed to have the urge to break their habits to not get stuck in what works and what they know. Already beginners are encouraged to find their own curiosity within the given material instead of just 'getting it right'. It feels like a very different attitude compared to other movement forms that use improvisation like Tango Argentino or Capoeira, where the research is the duty (or luxury) mainly of the advanced practitioners, who already integrated all the basic vocabulary. Among contact teachers there is a lot of exchange happening. Co-teaching in alternating constellations seems to be rather common, where the teachers meet in advance to develop the material they want to teach. And teaching itself is for many teachers a multi-layered research. We can use our own questions as a core direction for our teaching. There is also a rather strong labbing culture in the CI community, not only among teachers. Getting together with a few people to dance, to discover new things and to explore them. (Maybe this all sounds 'lapidary', but having seen other movement practices this inbuilt sense of research is astounding and I am incredibly grateful for it!)

I like to emphasize this point because there are also many people in the CI community, which are mainly attracted by the warm hearted sense of community they find. I guess if the social aspect becomes the main driving force of the CI community the dance form will lose its core. I believe that it is the practitioners who constantly bring the spirit of discovery and curiosity into the dance space are the ones who keep the CI community going and connected.

### **To 3. The heart of Contact Improvisation is its technique with two connected layers: 'physical Contact' & 'Improvisation'**

#### **a) the technique of physical contact**

I understand the core of Contact Improvisation technique, as 'following the point of contact with shared weight'. This seems to be the one thing that makes CI unique, outstanding from all other movement disciplines. It seems to be unique to use the option to give and share weight, continuously changing from a shared weight situation (leaning) to giving full (100%) weight and vice versa. And these weight shifts are possible without using hands and arms to hold or hook. Dances with this focus cultivate the option of losing balance together. It is not about stability and balance. It is about using the momentum of two physically connected people to lose balance together and to redirect their pathway through all spacious levels. We see dance partners in physical connection falling down and up and in all horizontal directions. The communication happens through touch taking advantage of the ability to read the laws of physics in order to deal with weight in a highly efficient way. The partners follow the point of contact, which is changing most of the time through rolling and sometimes through sliding. In a condensed version I'd call my core proposition for Contact Improvisation to be able to *'follow the point of contact with shared weight through all spatial levels'*.

This does not mean 'only this is Contact Improvisation!' It is only describing the uniqueness of CI on a technical level. If we want to stay curious and alive in sharing CI based dances over many years we highly likely need to include all the other option that I excluded in my core proposition: We don't need to share weight at all, we don't need to follow the point of contact, we don't even need to touch each other to have a satisfying dance at a jam. We can dance in slow motion, in very stable positions not moving through space at all, using highly inefficient movements and it can be wonderful. Only the state of listening and the negotiation of making choices in a dialogue with each other are essential then (see the technique of improvisation).

But for me this 'all inclusive idea' of CI is only valid if the people who share the dance **have the option** to work with shared weight. They might not choose this option. But if 'keeping shared weight moving' is not available I'd prefer to call it Dance Improvisation.

The focus on 'sharing weight' has some rather strong inclusions. Sharing weight is based on trust – on a very fundamental, physical level. We spend a lot of time learning when and how we can trust that someone can support our weight or how we can trust ourselves to support someone else's weight. I am sure that these experiences create connections to childhood experiences, where we were so familiar with trusting, being carried and taken care of (and if not we connect to a lack of an essential experience.) I guess that is a reason, why CI can touch us easily on a rather deep level, even though it is first of all a physical technique. Growing trust is part of the form. It can only be learned through daring to trust, which includes to acknowledge the fear instead of ignoring or pushing through it. In CI we are testing in a very physical sense our limits, the edge of our comfort zone, where trust and fear have their inspiring and challenging meetings.

It looks like that there is a rather big awareness of creating safe environments in CI classes and – if we are lucky – also in jams. These safe frames are the precondition for a healthy growth in the direction of more trust. I am very fascinated by the idea that the work on sharing weight is the deeper reason for the warmth and strength of the CI community. The socialising 'piece, love and harmony'-element that emerges around the CI practice has its origin in the physicality of the form. This is the reason why I believe that the CI community would start to dissolve if the focus got too much into this socializing aspect. We'd confuse origin with the pleasant side effect.

#### **b) the technique of Improvisation (within the shared weight situations)**

The phrase I used for the technique of physical contact 'following the point of contact with shared weight' starts with *'following'*. I see following as the core part of the technique of improvisation in CI. The basic attitude for following is to be available for as many options as I can. This leads into

the huge field of being present in the moment – for my inner condition and impulses as well as for the multi layered information from the outside. On a technical level in CI 'following' means first of all to deeply listen to my partner and trying to be available for what he or she proposes. We listen with the whole body, which receives information first of all through the skin. This is a *physical* communication. But it is also *emotionally* very touching when someone tries with all his might to understand me.

Following doesn't mean to be passive though. It is a very active state on a level of perception. But also movement wise it involves a certain amount of activity. *'Following' in CI means to organize my body into a proposed direction.* Saying 'yes' to the offer while still having choices within the way I follow.

Following needs a leader. And leading is 90% listening (as Martin Keogh phrased it so well). The beginning of leading is to listen to my partners structure and movements. I tune in with him or her. I follow what's already there. Now it makes sense to lead. *Leading means to propose a direction.* I listen to my partner's response and follow it, which enables me to redirect my partner's movement. If I am highly directive, so that my partner has only one option to follow and no real choice - apart from saying 'no', I wouldn't call it leading but manipulating (which can also be wonderful, if it is based on an agreement.)

In a regular CI dance changing roles of leading and following is the norm. Both can lead at the same time on different levels. For example one partner leads the direction through space while the other one leads the movements of his partner's torso, as we can explore in walking together while playing with torso manipulation.

There is also the option that both follow whichever direction they sense from the partner. It feels like the point of contact is leading, which is a core principle for many flow experiences in the dance.

As I mentioned before: I see following as the core part of the Technique of Improvisation in CI. The commitment to the point of contact requires a certain harmony or agreement in the point of contact, otherwise the duet falls apart. The basic technique of CI developed throughout the last 30 years in a direction that supports the flow together.

But of course there are many *other options in Improvisations* that can easily and happily be integrated. Saying 'no' is the first. The knowledge of genuine play is the most important improvisation resource for my practice. But there is also the huge toolbox from other improvisational techniques that take more care about the use of space and timing, emotional states and contrasts. But those compositional choices are often in the background. The communication in the touch is – for a long time – taking up a lot of space, when we learn the physical technique of CI.

What I call the 'technique of Improvisation' is one major reason why CI can integrate so easily elements from other dance and movement practices. The emphasize on listening in following and leading creates strong links to most other social dance forms and also to martial arts that use duet constellations. The openness in the Jams to include other improvisational and compositional tools allows CI to integrate a lot of knowledge from performing arts. I guess this is one reason, why I don't get bored with CI: so much information and inspiration I get from other disciplines and contexts I can integrate in my CI practice. I find that extraordinarily remarkable about CI.

There is one downside of Contact Improvisation being a very open form of improvisation. CI is very different to the improvisation used in Tango Argentino or Capoeira for example, which have a very strict vocabulary of movements and rhythms. In these disciplines the improvisation is mainly about choosing the order, timing and spaciousness of the moves. Creativity is encouraged by rather strong limitations.

Especially for beginners CI can create a scary openness with too much freedom, where they easily get lost. As a part of the practice we constantly need to be aware of our own desires, needs and available directions while sensing the offers and responses of the dance partner(s) and negotiating the physical outcome in each moment. To survive this amount of openness, freedom and choice it requires high skills in self perception and reflection. That might be a reason, why the community is so strongly limited to the white upper middle class - a community of good willed, well educated

privileged people. A rather conformist community that is probably not able to be as open as it likes to think it is.

## **CI – the uniqueness of a syncretistic dance form**

I like the word syncretistic. I found it while studying theology and it has the negative flavour of something not being pure. People were dismissed by constructing their own belief, feeding it from different sources, instead of following the pure dogma.

In the field of Contact Improvisation I consider myself to be more on the purist side, with quite a strong focus on the dance with its specific technique.

As I tried to show in my core proposition, CI is a highly specific and unique dance form. A Jam as the core frame for the practice is not a space where everyone does what he or she wants. As an outsider or newcomer that might be the first impression. But a Jam is a space to practice CI, which includes a certain knowledge and appreciation of the question 'how can we keep shared weight moving?'. The element of research is essential to keep each practitioner but also the form itself alive. It is one of the reasons, why CI has the natural desire to connect with knowledge from different movement- and communication systems. The improvisational aspect of CI with a strong emphasis on listening and following is probably a very smart and efficient base to connect with other disciplines. A syncretistic tendency is part of the form. 'Halleluja' says the purist!

For my own development in CI I experience it as necessary to study other movement techniques as well. To only practice CI is not enough to improve and extend my capabilities as a contact dancer.

My purist sides helps me to distinguish, which of the new elements are actually supporting my CI practice and which other ones are challenging or weakening it.

I guess this communication between the purist and the syncretist aspects within the field of Contact Improvisation has the potential to let the form develop without losing its essence. Hm, this sounds unsatisfyingly trivial but it is a pretty demanding, complex and rewarding direction to go. Let's go ...