

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Ilya Domanov

## Reflections on Nancy Stark Smith, Collaborating Founder of Contact Improvisation, part 1

by Jonathan Stein

*Internationally known dancer, editor, writer, organizer and a collaborating founder of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, died on May 1<sup>st</sup> after an extraordinary life of fearlessly exploring new ways of making art, breaking gender norms, and communicating the ephemeral body-mind states of experiences of dance. She was in the initial group working with Steve Paxton, who originated Contact Improvisation, along with Nita Little, Daniel Lepkoff, Barbara Dilley, Mary Fulkerson, and Nancy Topf, among others. Influenced by the ground-breaking dance-theater experiments in improvisation of the Grand Union and Judson Dance Theater, she ignited a new revolution after the first public performance of Contact Improvisation in New York City in 1972 by propagating the work world-wide in a myriad of ways.*

*In 1975, she co-founded with Lisa Nelson [Contact Quarterly, a Vehicle for Moving Ideas](#), which has become a critical international journal on improvisation and somatics.*

*In 1990, Nancy created the [Underscore](#), a long-form dance improvisation structure that incorporated Contact Improvisation into a broader arena of improvisational dance practice. The Underscore is practiced around the world, including at the Global Underscore in June every year since 2000. She also developed her pedagogy, the [States of Grace](#), which involved twelve arenas ("Pods") of dance experience.*

*Since her death CQ has created a Facebook page for remembrances, [Nancy Stark Smith Harvest](#) and a website, [Honoring Nancy Stark Smith](#); and [Dance Magazine](#) has published Wendy Perron's obituary. thINKingDANCE has invited movement artists, writers and others who knew Stark Smith or were influenced by her across the generations to offer their reflections. This part 1 joins remembrances from those in the Philadelphia area; part 2 includes those across the United States and from London. A memorial essay from K.J. Holmes*

is being published as well.

She has [said](#) that “part of the power of the work is touching, physical contact,” and the world’s loss of Nancy Stark Smith is particularly poignant in these times when dancing with each other and touch have taken a long pause. Her signature email line, “Hope to dance with you along the way,” is one that we will continue to embrace.

## **The magnificent dancing/writing mid-wife**

by Lisa Kraus

If it weren't for Nancy, thINKingDANCE might not exist! Though I met her in the early days of contact improvisation and enjoyed countless dances and discussions with her over the years, it was when she edited my writing that I got a fuller view of her superpowers. In dancing, Nancy shared her boundless ease, deep playfulness, and brazen adventurousness. She modeled letting go of fear, expectation, and self-consciousness. In working with writing, she midwived those same qualities, on steroids.

*Contact Quarterly* had approached me about distilling and publishing the weblog I kept when I taught Paris Opera Ballet the Trisha Brown dance *Glacial Decoy* in 2003. It was initially an avalanche of words. Within them, Nancy saw the potential for a compelling story of how ballet dancers could embody many of the things that contacters embrace: gravity, momentum, 360 degree potential for movement.

Nancy as my editor was politic, cajoling, and kind but firm during revision after surgical revision, helping me see how much didn't need to be included and how what was left could be clear and fully communicative. She celebrated progress gleefully, and left no stone unturned. After completing that many-months-long experience with her, I was way more ready to approach language as “material” to be cut and shaped, and fully hooked on writing, going on to write for the Philadelphia Inquirer and Dance Magazine and to co-found thINKingDANCE. So tD owes its very existence in large part to the magnificent dancing/writing midwife Nancy Stark Smith.



Photo: Lila Hurwitz

## **A legacy of showing us a different way to make art**

by David Brick

Like Nancy Stark Smith, I was trained as a gymnast and I think that is one of the reasons that Contact Improvisation spoke to me when I encountered it on my college campus in the late 80's. It was immediately challenging and kinesthetically thrilling. I felt a satisfying skillfulness doing it, though I also felt like an absolute beginner. CI has been a root for my dance practice from that moment until now. It sustained me as I stumbled through Modern dance and Ballet classes--what I believed was the official work of becoming a real dancer. I am not sure what those techniques gave me of lasting value as a dancer/ artist/ human. . . CI, as a dynamic form of discovered and ever-evolving principles, has sustained me as a choreographer, dancer, teacher, thinker, convener, leader, follower, husband, father and friend. It has been a touchstone of insight for nearly everything I do in my life.

I never met Nancy or Steve [Paxton], though I am plenty old enough to think that I would have, especially since I have taught CI for many years. The fact that I haven't personally met or danced with Nancy Stark Smith might seem strange but I actually see it as a testament to the values of the form that lionize the agency of individual bodies. This dance belongs to you, the form says over and over. You don't need anyone's permission to practice, innovate, explore or change the dance, it belongs to you and your body. . .

It is a very special thing to have made a dance like this during a historically unprecedented era of hyper-materialism. To defy the times and make something with such a deeply humble politic, something far-reaching and transformative to so many people who rightly regard the insight they discover in the dance as an insight of their own. In such a profound achievement, Nancy's legacy is also to show us a different way to make art. She shows us how to make something that belongs to others; to make something that belongs to everyone; to continually make something that you give away, and to make something that only exists as something made by everyone. What brilliant, radical, deeply insightful art she made. What deeply humanist, feminist, and profoundly generous art she made. . .

Thank you Nancy Stark Smith for giving me myself, for helping me to be born continuously into this world. I am so sorry I won't get to meet you here after all.

## **Teaching that connected dancing and life**

by Leah Stein

I am grateful that Nancy is an early and lasting influence. She was my first contact teacher. She awakened an appetite for improvisation that I didn't know I had and imparted a foundation of truths about movement, presence, curiosity, levity, gravity, playfulness, strength and more. Her teaching connected dancing and life, exploring vast ideas and created opportunities for the most subtle discoveries; "telescope in, telescope out." I remember her class about levity, and exploring "sparks" to awaken new energy. She bounced around the room (Philadelphia Contact Festival in the early 2000s) with joy and light, grounded in the air.

She danced on the page; CQ gives voice to a world community of CI artists, teachers, explorers. My understanding of the form is deeply tied to her magical ability to unify a room of people, inviting everyone to dive in, smiling, her long braid another limb, her body beaming a brilliant and deep joy of dancing with others. I will always be inspired by her tireless and bountiful ability to give and receive, to be curious and open, and to live her understanding of dance and life as one. Thank you to this extraordinary teacher, artist and human being.

## **'Epilogue' and dancing on and on**

by Curt Haworth

Not too long ago, hosting her in my home for a workshop in Philly that wove between contact, contemplative dance, and the Underscore, a long weekend rich in the depths of Nancy's research.

Early in this millennium, diving into the *Underscore* with Nancy and Mike [Vargas] at Eden's Expressway in NYC. The old familiar walls resonating with new ideas, as we entwined bodies and played tiddlywinks with Mike's musical sticks.

In the mid-nineties, hot summer days at Bates, we both had second period free and would solve the NYT crossword puzzle with Mark Dendy outside on the café patio. Driving in late afternoon with Nancy and Julie Carr to the 'Pond' for rejuvenating swims after dancing all day. Drinking red wine on the faculty porch as the musicians gathered and played long into the night. Dancing at the jam, feeling I was monopolizing her time and trying to end the dance, and her saying "epilogue" and us dancing on. Repeating this again and again until we had danced the jam into a late-night end.

Wishing now, that there was one more epilogue.



Photo: Arthur Fink

## **Anything could happen**

by Asimina Chremos

It was the summer of 1987 or 1988. Nancy Stark Smith was guiding participants in a dance workshop session through Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. I was in a class among sweaty young things ambulating and motoring around independently yet together, like molecules of air inside a balloon. I remember the room was huge and bright, with a ceiling so far above our heads that I felt both immensely free and completely dwarfed.

With her soft and clear voice, Nancy guided us through poetic imagery to find different qualities of movement related to the elements. She took us through Fire, Earth, Air, and Water — and then she introduced the element of Ether. Anything could happen, she said.

Change could occur suddenly, out of the blue, without warning. You could surprise yourself, things could appear and disappear in the blink of an eye. Now that she is gone, seemingly so suddenly out of our sphere, I remember this.

### **Long-braided force**

by Marion Ramirez

Nancy—I feel I knew Nancy through reading her articles and *Caught Falling* book, practicing the *Underscore* and watching videos of her dancing....Through the years I was inspired by her long-braided force, focused, playful, strong and supple. The first time I met her at a workshop called *Making the Mystery Visible, dancing in open scores*, she guided us step by step through the process of navigating a contact improvisation practice by taking care of self while taking in every person in the room; and with the aim of having the ability to appear and disappear from the group mind and the individual mind.

Even after 20 years of practicing contact improvisation, the overwhelming sensation of being with so many people at a physical and energetic level is a constant work in progress. I was able to learn from Nancy how to arrive to my own center close to the navel and radiate it out to each person in the room as an invisible thread like a rainbow of light that connects to their center with compassion and non-judgment, opening the peripheral vision and riding at one's own rhythms. These invisible connections soon start to be felt and a space of respect and connection guides the group together.



Photo: Rachel Anne Saudek

## The *Underscore*, a bountiful container with open content

by Loren Groenendaal

Nancy had an incredible ability to fly, fall, spiral, trust, to be strong or light, and to choose words carefully. She was truly present with people, noticing and being with them, pushing them when they were ready, or holding and caring if they needed that. Every time I studied with Nancy or was in her presence, I learned something.

The first time I met her, she was finding words to describe an exercise and she started skipping. I had rarely seen a teacher be so light or child-like. Just seeing her move with such buoyancy gave me confidence to infuse my own levity into my teaching, adding more depth and play to my work.

She leaves with us the *Underscore*, an open container with bountiful content that is present, generous, empathetic, grounded, playful, mindful, and compositional. I dance, teach, and facilitate the *Underscore* regularly with love and care and now in her memory.

The best lesson I gained from Nancy is how to be present with what is, how things actually are. I don't have to imagine or create something new to have pleasure. I can change my movement or my perception to tap into new fields of curiosity.



Photo: Patrick Beelaert

## CI a global dance in an unjust world

by Nicole Bindler

I co-organized Nancy Stark Smith's workshop, *Making the Mystery Visible* in Philadelphia in 2015 where I learned her practice of assimilating partner material through solo cool-down dancing. She imparted the importance of integrating embodied knowledge through *movement*, which forever changed my teaching. I also worked with her on a couple of pieces for Contact Quarterly, one on my gender and somatic research, [Clitoral Embodiment](#), and the other [on bias and neutrality in CI](#) in relation to Palestine/Israel.

Nancy responded to requests for acknowledgment of Palestinians' invisibilization in my CQ piece and a [related petition](#) by including the

following text in the [packets sent to Global Underscore facilitators](#), “We request a moment of silent acknowledgement during the STAND at the beginning of this year’s *Global Underscore* to acknowledge those throughout the world, in Palestine and elsewhere, who experience limited freedom of movement because of political, racial, or economic barriers. Nancy Stark Smith will be doing this in Estonia and invites you to take this suggestion as you wish into your *Global Underscore* practice.” I am grateful for all that Nancy did to develop CI into an internationally recognized dance form, and her willingness to face its political implications as a global dance in an unjust world.

(Another [set of reflections on Nancy Stark Smith](#) and [a memorial essay by K.J. Holmes](#) also appear in thINKingDANCE.)

For more background on the work of Nancy Stark Smith see:

Stark Smith website: [www.nancystarksmith.com](http://www.nancystarksmith.com)

Contact Quarterly: [www.contactquarterly.com](http://www.contactquarterly.com)

Global Underscore: [www.globalunderscore.com](http://www.globalunderscore.com)

For video of Stark Smith performing, and in workshops and talks see:

*Poetics of Touch* (video by Sara Pozzoli & Germana Sicilliani, Casina Settarte, Italy, 2007) (

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6Pt0OXK7es>)

Global Underscore, 2014 Warsaw flow, Intern’l Dance Contact Improvisation Festival (

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOGLMZdm2uA>)

“An emerging underscore—A conversation with Nancy Stark Smith,” (interview in London, 2012) (

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzG609NWp1Y>)

Performance with Mike Vargas, Andrew Harwood, Ray Chung and Nancy Stark Smith (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaczvbl860>)

Nancy Stark Smith Introduction to *Fall After Newton* (1987 film) (<https://www.somatics2019.com/somaticfilms>)

By Jonathan Stein

June 1, 2020