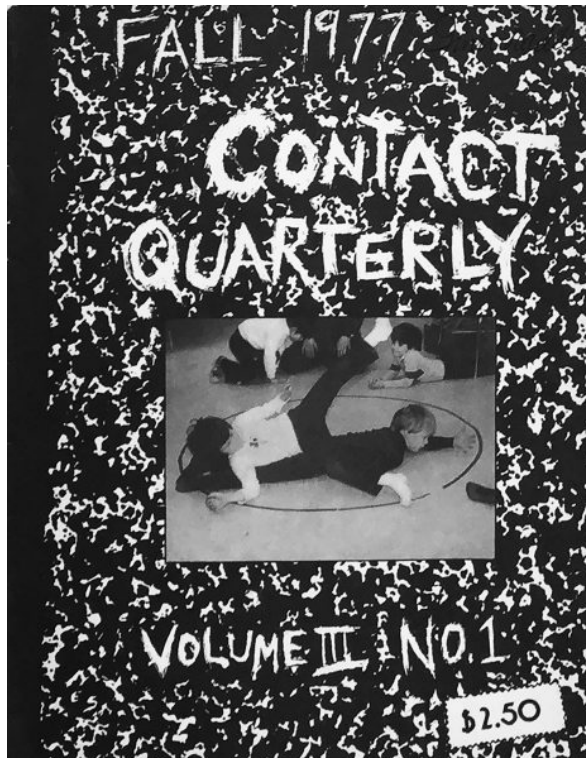


Work to Be Discovered: Interview with Nancy Stark Smith

Defne Erdur



— *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Fall 1977

Nancy Stark Smith is a pioneer in Contact Improvisation, as well as the co-founder and co-editor of *Contact Quarterly*. Curious about the impact of this groundbreaking journal on Contact Improvisation, I interviewed her at the 4th IDOCDE Symposium in 2016. Nancy represents a dedicated group of dance teachers immersed in the practice of documenting their own work, which arguably amounts to tracing the history of contemporary dance simultaneously as it is being made. Her inspiring words during this interview have given me motivation and reassurance about our collective work at idocde.net, for which I am currently the editor.

The below is not a transcript but a synopsis intended to facilitate a more fruitful interaction with the interview. A supplemental list of questions is followed by a set of statements extracted from the interview.¹ (Numbers in parentheses indicate approximate time in the video recording.) We hope that the ‘frame’ remains ‘thin’ enough to leave a ‘large space’ for the readers/viewers to shape their own encounters with Nancy Stark Smith. It was after all Steve Paxton, the initiator of Contact Improvisation, who set the pace: *for the work to be discovered, the center must remain empty...*²



— Photo documentation of the interview by Martin Streit

Questions

Documentation: How important is documentation for the production and exchange of knowledge?

[00:02:20]

Print vs. Internet: How does a print magazine function like internet?

[00:05:22]

Reading Others: Why read something if you have not also contributed to it?

[00:07:11]

Impulse, Intention, Outcome: What kind of impulses and intentions behind the outcome? Do they really matter? How?

[00:07:11]

Work, Sharing, Originality: How much effort to share the work? Too busy to make that a priority? Not worth sharing? Someone else is doing something similar already?

[00:09:32]

English and the International Context: How to deal with the international context when English is not the primary language for many dancers?

[00:09:32]

Academic vs. Artistic: Are the boundaries between academic and artistic approaches dissolving?

[00:11:02]

Choice of Ideas: How to open space for voices that haven't been heard? Which voices? What kind of ideas? Unconscious choices?

[00:13:06]

Practice: How to know where to join for the right kind of practice?

[00:14:03]

“Unimaginable”: How do you make something unimaginable, which has existed for forty years?

[00:15:36]

Editing: How long do you spend editing your work?
[00:17:42]

Intentions: What are your intentions in documenting? To generate, preserve, communicate, or promote? How do others use your output?
[00:28:40]

Stuff: Where do you find the stuff? Would you ever find the stuff in 50-100 years, that somebody sent today? And does it matter? Maybe there's too much stuff in the world, thank God it just disappears as soon as it happens?
[00:28:40]

Writing: How to relate writing to dance? Any help for dancers to feel comfortable extending their bodily experience onto the paper?
[00:25:57]

Evaluation: How does evaluation work? What's the next step? Sharing the material online? Why not keep generating instead? Is there a need for synthesis to give documents utility and durability?
[00:34:06]

Direction: How to know where to go in order to get what you want?
[00:37:48]

Innovation: How to remain true to the spirit of the art form while being innovative at the same time?
[00:42:52]

Now! What's needed right now?
[00:43:22]

Next? What to do when a form stops being useful?
[00:43:22]

Materiality: How to decide whether to keep things in physical form?
[00:48:20]



— Photo documentation of the interview by Martin Streit

Statements

Participate! If you are interested, find out more, and participate...
[00:03:50]

Contact Quarterly: The intention to stay connected and communicate was the impetuses for the magazine. The idea of leaving a trace over years and having someone come along and say “Wow this is great, I can read these people’s point of view over the years!” was not the intention...
[00:07:11]

Polyphony: Things have been continually re-described by different voices, different people creating an amazing polyphony... “Let’s put a poem there, a drawing here, oh another photograph...” Creating multi-layers of documents and approaches...
[00:08:22]

Experimenting with the “Inconceivable:” It is harder to break out of things and experiment in ways that are inconceivable...
[00:15:36]

The Internet: Internet is a huge, vast field...
[00:19:08]

Experience into Language: The choice of prepositions is everything: Is it with that or from that or to that or between that? It gets you into some amazing experiential details as you try to translate experience into language, which can travel across time and space in a way dance cannot...
[00:19:53]

Participation vs. Institutionalization: If you care about it and wanted it to exist, you need to participate. It’s that participatory aspect which is easy to forget when something seems institutionalized. You think: “Oh it goes on and maybe I use it or I don’t...”
[00:23:58]

“The Soup:” You start making a soup with a stone and water and then maybe a carrot and then you keep adding and then you have the soup and you wonder how you got it...
[00:22:58]

“The Wild West:” Internet is like the Wild West. It’s like any outpost: stick your stick in and build a little campsite and it’s yours...
[00:36:18]

Technology: The technology has been very challenging...
[00:41:32]

Thicker the Frame, Smaller the Space: We are not trying to make the frame thicker so that there is no space inside. But it’s tricky. We generate more exercises, concepts, and principles. And they all seem so good and useful. But then the frame gets thicker and the space inside gets smaller...
[00:48:20]

Hold On and Let Go: To be able to let go, you should be holding onto something to start with...
[00:52:57]

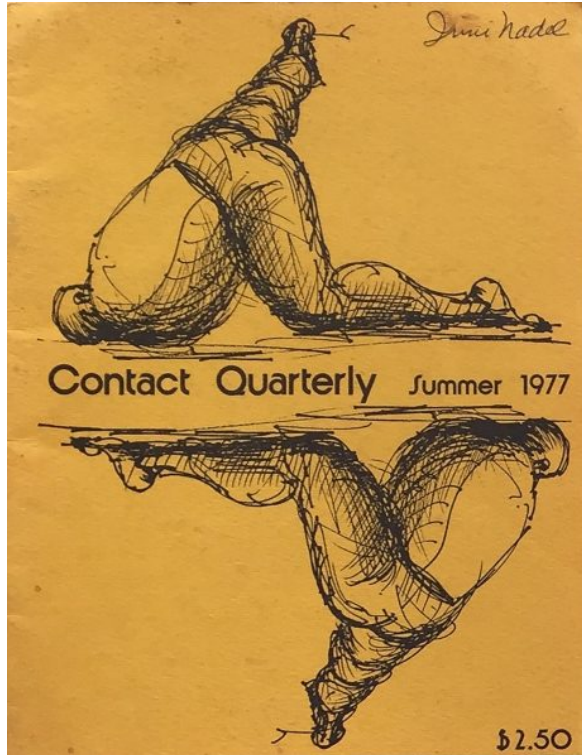
Precise, Sensitive, Wordy: What happens gets very precise, very sensitive, very wordy... We also have to be creative for the concepts to be precise. But at the same time, it’s like studying the principles. So maybe about the documentation of the form there might be a

way of getting precise about certain principles and allowing the form and the dynamics to fill the space...

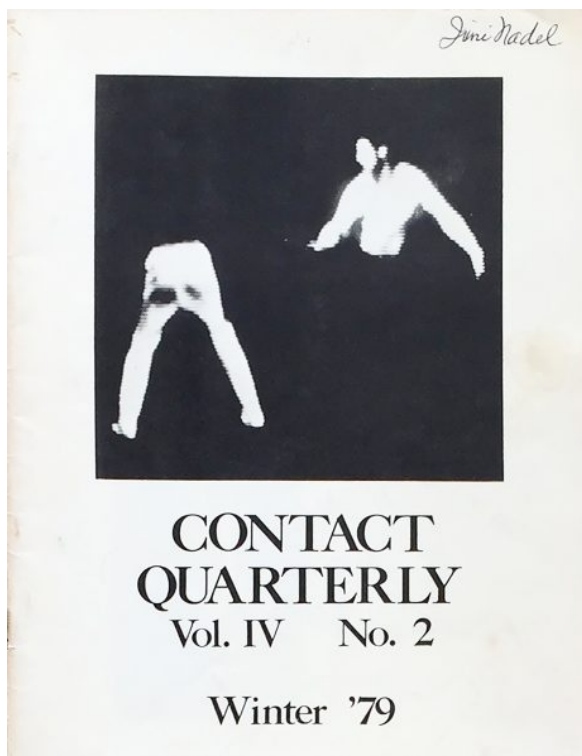
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In-Between Now and Next: So you have to put this down. Let go of it to reach for the other. In-between you don't have either...

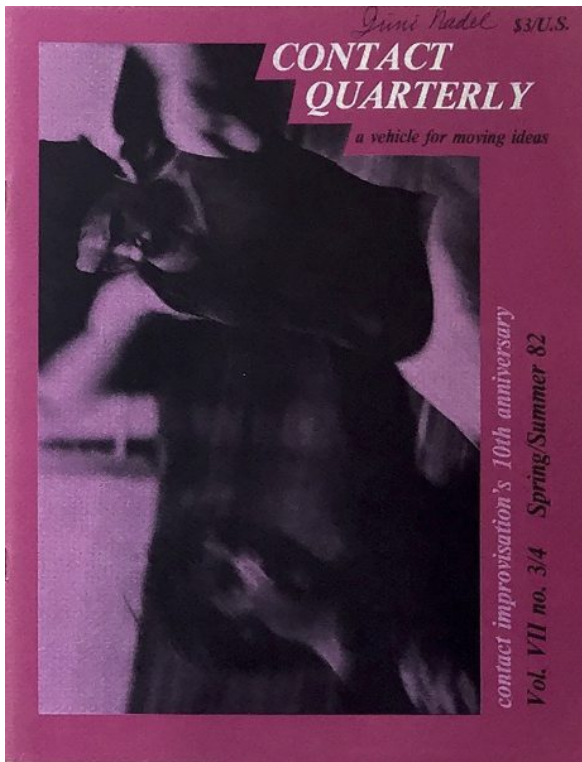
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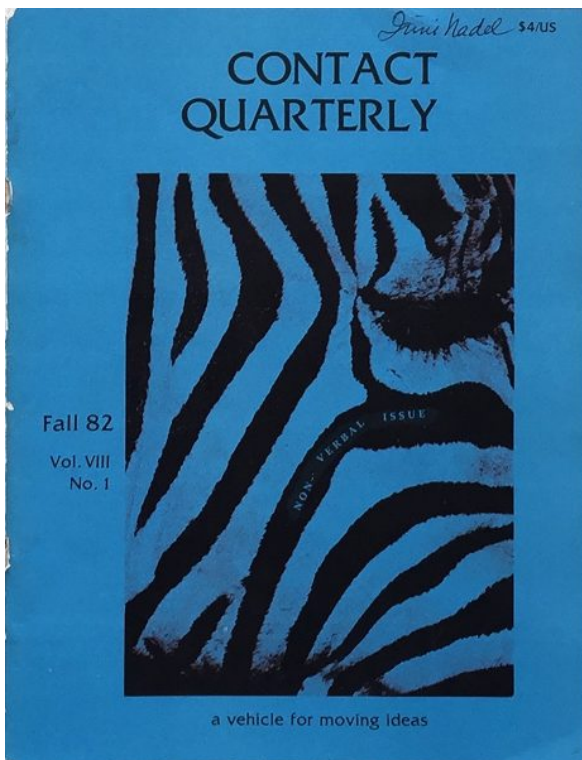
— *Contact Quarterly*, Summer 1977



— *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 1979



— *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3/4,
Spring/Summer 1982



— *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 1982



— *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 1983

NOTES

1. For the transcription of the interview, see: <http://www.idocde.net/idocs/1716>.
2. According to Nancy, "Steve allowed the work to be discovered rather than dictated, leaving space within the established framework for

continual exploration". And this image of 'the frame and the empty middle' arose in conversation between Nancy and Martin Keogh when they were facilitating CITE (CI Teachers Exchange, in the States).