



Editors' note: The following is a lightly edited transcript of the recorded conversation. The text has been edited for clarity.

Joaquín Alfei: Well, I was just thinking how to open this invitation to talk. Quite frankly, I believe that in the dance improvisation domain, someone whose last name is Little, does not need an introduction. But, I do have a first question that is sort of a cliché, especially during this particular year; 2022, the 50th anniversary of contact improvisation. Since the first contact improvisation performance in 1972, the West Coast Touring Group that then...

Nita Little: "you come, we'll show you what we do".

Joaquín: quickly became known as the 'ReUnion' group, until now is only 50 years. 50 years in which you have been actively teaching, developing the form, and researching and so the first question that comes, also with this historical perspective in mind, is why are you still interested in contact improvisation?

Nita: Good question. Why would it take me 50 years to get here? Well, I am a dancer, choreographer and that is kind of my identity and contact improvisation is the form, or is one of two forms it has interested me the most. And the reason why contact improvisation is because it proposes a way of being present as a physical form in a relational practice, that is very different than other dance forms. Partly because it is so incredibly functional. It is not

gestural, it is not expressive, it is functional. I put my hand here in order to pass weight and it is not that it is purely and solely functional because within every action there is also expression. I am tired right now, I am quite tired, so, that tiredness is here in this action. It also has that expression, but it is drive; what is driving it is not expression. What is driving it is this relational possibility, relational potential that I share with another body-mind. And early, I mean I am talking the first year of contact improv, I realized that the mind was incredibly important to whatever happened or that came about, because I nearly jumped on my boyfriend's head in the middle of a dance. When that happened, I had known, I had felt it coming. It was really a very curious moment; like 'there is a moment about to happen, pay attention!'. There it was, and because I had heightened my attention to a certain level, it ended up being just a beautiful moment. So, I thought 'okay, pay attention'. So, it was entering places that the dance training I have done before never did, and by then I was an advanced dancer. That is why I got into it, but what has sustained it is investigation. What does it mean to be a body-mind?

Joaquín: So, if I understand correctly, from the very beginning you approached this dance form, or the study to develop this dance form, with the attitude of a researcher?

Nita: Absolutely. I was not interested in furthering yet another aesthetic, a private personal aesthetic or, you know, who knows if I was interested in being the artist. I was really interested in the kind of science attitude of 'what is here? let's figure this out'. There is something going on here and I have to move in order to explore what it is.

Joaquín: It makes me think about this. Well, it is a question, but it is also a comment. Do you believe that contact improvisation can teach us about, I mean, can teach us about dance in general, but also beyond dance as a research tool?

Nita: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. First of all, I do not think contact improvisation, the proposal of contact improvisation, is limited to this skin-to-skin investigation. I think it is also a spatial investigation. I think the proposal has grown over time, at least in me, the proposal has grown to include the various levels of embodiment that you are. For instance, you know, I think early on we were really interested in what the skeleton was doing. We were really working on a skeletal level, but by now we are really interested in fascia. And then in this bio-attentional fascia or tensegrity. I feel it; fascia, when it travels between you and me there is a thickness. When you and I do something and we thicken the space between us, I have incredible curiosity of what that is. It is tactile. It excites me. It is not visible. I will not call it energy because I think energy, that language is just not good enough.

Joaquín: Sometimes I think that consciousness is a sort of target of contact improvisation research, when I read your texts or when I read things that Steve (Paxton) has written and published. One of the things that came to mind, is that you have been researching and investigating perceptual consciousness and how that is built through this dance form. From a psychological point of view or a neuroscientists view, that is really interesting because, I think, it immediately shows the world that there are different ways of knowing. From a phenomenological point of view or from the first person-point of view, we can approach questions that are very similar in the academic/scientific domain. For example, I would say that one of your favorite things to work is attention. You talk a lot about attention.

Nita: I did a Ph.D. on attention!

Joaquín: For example. We are going there... I believe it is difficult to think only about attention without thinking about consciousness or awareness or perception. So, this is a very simple question, how come you ended up with attention? How did attention capture your

attention in contact improvisation or improvisation to work towards this phenomenon?

Nita: Well, the simple, easiest way, at least; I was doing this black jazz ensemble dancing with Judith Dunn and when I started playing with Steve (Paxton) and this thing contact improvisation, they were so different. The mind, or the attention that one had to use, I would not have used that word attention then. But the state of mind that I had to be in to do ensemble, modern dance ensemble, literally movement improvisation and contact improvisation, were so different. I mean, I really had to shift myself with both of those and I loved them both. I mean, I have found value and wonder in both; more wonder in contact, but I had to start asking myself, how is it? Do these things need to live as two separate worlds? And in that first 10 years of contact improv, I mostly attended contact improv and then I started to do solo work. And solo work was hard, really hard after 10 years of dancing, only with people, in duets mostly. So, in order to do solo work, I again had to really look at what am I attending to, what is driving this moment? There is no function, there is nobody making me engage in any certain particular way and yet, anything that is gestural just seems absolutely limp, empty headed. And so, figuring that out and then getting from there into ensemble dancing again, I eventually figured out these were the same, these could live as one, I could be one dancer and engage in all of this in one moment and that required using, or finding my attention in different ways, applying attention differently within a single action, even how the attention is applied, the physicality of attention and figuring out the attention is physical was a big step of all of that.

So, did I answer your question?

Joaquín: Yes, of course you did, but I was just thinking why attention and not perception?

Nita: Okay.

Joaquín: I am sure you have thought about it.

Nita: So, attention is the articulation, in some ways, of our perceptual organization. So, perception is not just a given, there is not just given sight, there is not just given hearing. There is not just given touch or any of those haptic sensations. There is creative choice making, it is making a stew. What are you going to put in it? And those are unique to each one of us and unique within any given moment. And to me, I thought after doing all of this movement stuff, it was not perception I was concerned about. It was the application of my perceptions, which meant attention, and awareness was interesting and important and it is part of this whole thing. But, attention is so much more active than awareness. There is something about awareness that has this kind of passivity, once I am aware of it, it lives in awareness and it becomes like an attention, foreground awareness in a sense.

Joaquín: I see and at some point in your career, and this is quite interesting for me, you became interested in academia. I do not know if that was from the very beginning or this is something that happened recently. You, if I am correct, got your Ph.D. in 2014. You passed that. We passed that.

Nita: I went back for a Ph.D. when I was 58.

Joaquín: So, before that was 30, 40 years of research as a dancer in the studio, performances, etcetera, etcetera, how come that from that world you went to the academic world? I am interested in this transition. If there was something about it that helped you to crystallize or operationalize some of the work that you have been doing before that?

Nita: At the time I was living in Santa Cruz. I had had a research lab, a dance research lab, and I had a dance company also and, I had been teaching what we called 'The Lab'. It was the

Friday lab and dancers would come and I would work with them. I would make propositions through scoring. I would propose a score and everyone would work on it and then we would talk about what we did. I realized that there was so much information here about the body-mind, the body that is a mind and at that point, we are talking about mid-nineties, late nineties, early two thousands, actually. I started that lab in the mid-nineties and it went through; I did not go back for a Ph.D. until 2008. So, it was that period of time in which I kept building more and more understanding about all of this. And I thought it really needed to be understood. By then, I had gone back to study what I called the technologies of the mind; so, I had studied hypnosis and was a clinical and medical hypnotherapist.

And I also studied NLP (i.e., Neuro Linguistic Programming) because I was interested in how is it that by working with what people pay attention to, they are able to make such huge change in experience. So, I went and studied those around the late nineties and early two thousands. So, then I applied that information to what was going on in the lab and what I was doing with my dance company. I went, whoa, there is so much here that is not understood and I need to learn to write, to get this out. I felt as though dance had taught me so much, I needed to figure out how to write up, how to do it. At that time I think, I was pretty much afraid of writing, I did not write very much, and I knew I had to learn to write and I wanted to know what conversations were going on in other fields that might be applicable.

Joaquín: I was going to ask if you were thinking about this sort of cross-fertilization between the domains or if it was not present at all that curiosity?

Nita: No, I was totally curious in what else, or who else is thinking this way and in which fields, What are they coming up with? You have to understand most of my dance career, I have been absolutely dumbfounded that people find

dance so limiting, that they think that dancers are not intelligent, they think dance is just this flaky, a fun thing that kids do. I was really fed up with it because to me, dancers are absolutely stunningly brilliant. They know how to think body-mind, and most of the world does not.

Joaquín: But do you think that academia is a way to legitimate that? I do not know.

Nita: Was I going back to the legitimate it? No, I was going back to learn to write, to find out what else others were saying and to speak as a dancer to that. Well, the problem for me was that I thought other fields are not actually, and I am a snob, I thought that in other fields there is no way they are going to understand what dancers can understand because they do not have the skills. So, dance really needs to be there.

Joaquín: Was it worth it? The Ph.D. journey?

Nita: I had so much fun. It was one of the best things I've ever done. I adored it. It was terrifying at times and frustrating at times, but I had amazing people to work with; Joe Dumit and Lynette Hunter.

Joaquín: You were with Joe?

Nita: Joe was my lead. One of my lead professors. I got to Joe, and I had conversations

Joaquín: I did not know. Of course, you were in University of California Davis, but I did not know who...

Nita: Yeah, almost every week Joe and I met, at least in the latter two, three years of my Ph.D. Oh it was great, what fun, I mean honest to God, what fun!

Joaquín: I think I know the answer of this question, but maybe you can explain further how this Ph.D. journey impacted you in the

dance, in the studio, and in your teaching especially.

Nita: I have always been precise with language. I have always been somebody that was detail oriented. It made me more so, I mean it gave me tools to step into other language. It increased my vocabulary, so to speak. It increased the realm of my concerns. It helped me travel various scales in those concerns. From the very small to the very large, the social, the political. It allowed me to dare to be as political as I am and feel as though. I mean, I was political before, but I think I can be a little bit more incisive with my politics now.

Joaquín: So, I have read somewhere that when you teach, you teach politics in action, I think I know what it means, but I would like to hear it from you...

Nita: What does politics mean? Politics means the kind of application of power; it is what is going on with power relations. If we take that to the political level or the governmental level, then we get into policy and all that stuff which has to do with power; who gets the power, who gets the money, economic power mostly, but political power is about whose voice are we listening to? In dance and movement, in interpersonal relations, there is power too. I mean, if my voice gets louder or if you speak and I just ride through you. Well the power is, I mean I am assuming power, but I can do that just with body position here in this camera for instance. It is so interesting what we are doing here, right?

Joaquín: The second gesture; that of course operationalizes the dynamics of powers.

Nita: Exactly.

Joaquín: But I am bringing this topic also, because sometimes there is sort of a-political, big a-political vibe, or anti-political vibe in contact improvisation in festivals especially, which sometimes are considered islands of

pleasure and are used for hormonal-release experiences. A wall is built between the outside world and the festival

Nita: I am not really very interested in festival culture or in jam culture.

Joaquín: Me either, but it exists. It is definitely part of the contact improvisation culture, especially here in Europe. Well, now we are in England, but same thing, I would say 'how interesting it is that someone is bringing this topic about politics, power, etcetera'.

Nita: Contact began politically, in many ways as a political commentary, working with tools principles that are martial arts principles and applying them. Not to me manipulating your physical centre, but to give my centre; as we did earlier today, how do I give you my center?

Joaquín: The weight is... I don't not remember exactly the thing that Steve wrote. "The dancer's weight is only his to give: not to possess", but in Aikido, you give the centre but it is still yours.

Nita: Exactly, and in this work we are saying 'this is where I live (holding body) and there is a thing that we do, that we have to be able to trust ourselves to respond. It is not blind giving, it is not I just give to you, it is I give to you and if you drop me, I have already figured out my relationship to the earth. So, I am ready to be dropped even as I am giving to you, I am responsible for my own wellbeing, although I will work toward your wellbeing as well. I am not going to manipulate you, I am not going to manipulate you to make sure you are okay and I am not going to manipulate you to get you to do the dance I want you to do. If you are falling off of me, I will do my very best to organize my body so that you slide off of me, not drop flat, but I will not wrap my arms around your arms, my hands around your arms and stop you from

falling, primarily actually because the potential for injury is so much greater.'

Joaquín: For both of us.

Nita: For both of us, but particularly for the person falling.

Joaquín: Yes

Nita: I trust the person who is falling to have responses or internal reflexes that will take care of them as long as I do the best I can to grace their way, not grease their way. I have to tell you, once we did dance naked and greased and it was pretty much terrifying.

Joaquín: Have you ever felt the risk of over intellectualizing what you are doing? I really enjoy your teaching. Personally, it has been big pleasure to participate in your workshop, I am also really fond of the material; to work with touch, decomposing time to open potentials for movement. I mean, this sounds physically interesting for me, but also theoretically interesting because it brings a lot of material between subject and object. If I am talking as a scientist, the subject should not touch the object, it should be something sterile, right? We know in dance improvisation that that is impossible. When you are observing a thing, the thing becomes another thing - is really impossible to disassociate in improvisation.

Nita: Right, we are constantly co-creating.

Joaquín: Karen Barad, Brian Massumi, etc. all these authors that you know very well. All of this could sometimes come to my mind as an over-intellectualization of what I am doing. I suppose my comment or questions is if you have you ever felt this? Like, 'I am thinking too much about this or have been put under the label of thinking too much about this?'

Nita: I do not worry about that because I feel as though it comes down to something

extremely practical. So, I am hoping that every concept I ever put out comes down to something very practical. And that in this work, in workshop settings, I am there to help people understand why it is practical. Which is to say how do you touch someone?

Joaquín: You are embodying the concepts.

Nita: Yes, and when the concepts are embodied, then you are in a position to get even new material, because you are going to be moving and understanding the world differently. So, in each one of those concepts, it is a step when it gets embodied. It is a nice thing to play with, it is a nice configuration, it is a filigree, a bit of filigree, but it does not do something that I am interested in like; what do things do? What changes because of this embodiment? How does this understanding change me in my relation, so that something new is available and possible?

You used the word communion, I am totally into communion, knowing perfectly well that communion is something that will come and go. It is what happens when relations stop being temporally here and there, this and that, and relations become immediate in the same moment. So, that same moment is present as an experience of inequivalent knowledge, not the same knowledge. But, if I touch you and have allowed my identity; Nita, who's identifying as attention, not with my physical form, but with my attentional form, I touch you and I experience that which we are co-creative form. That we are moved as it is happening, at the same moment that you are moving, that you are recognizing your own movement. In fact, it gets to such a speed that you cannot think a thought about moving without it also being my thought and then we are in new material, now we are in a new potential. I am interested in what that potential takes and where that will take us; that potential means perhaps there is a language that is attention - perhaps attention is in fact a language and if it were a language would become something that

is much faster than verbal language? Well would we want that? Why would we want that? But that would require a completely different politics. You could not have the old politics of power and have that kind of language. Anyway, that is where I go.

Joaquín: Regarding what you have just said, do you think that this direction is where the contact culture also should go? Do you have an opinion about for the years to come?

Nita: I find cultures problematic.

Joaquín: Maybe culture is not the right word for this, but movement maybe is; the contact improv movement. I do not know what the right word would be.

Nita: I would love if some aspect of it did, I would not expect that all aspects of it will because things do not tend to move in a straight line. I think that the contact improv dancers who are really interested in articulating phenomenon, the phenomenon of relations and really interested in paying into a knowledge base about relations, perhaps into practices of relations that are world changing. That would be divine, I would like to see that. I see that the world becomes relationally more intelligent, and I think contact improvisation is one tool that offers the potential of exploring new ways of being in relations, not just with the human but with the more-than-human, the other-than-human, the non-human, you know?

Joaquín: This brings me to this last question, how important has it been that contact improvisation has been an open code? That there is not someone policing the form.

Nita: Policing it. Mm-hmm.

Joaquín: There are influences.

Nita: Ann Copper Albright is suggesting that it starts to be organized and policed, organized

and codified on some level and I think that is dangerous because every form that is ever codified dies after a while, as does not keep growing. It does not keep growing because you cannot imagine where something can go; I never could imagine this place for contact improvisation, that I would be in this place with contact improvisation back 50 years, back 30 years. I could not imagine this place back 20 years. I could not imagine this place even 10 years ago! So, I would find it dreadful to codify it. Do I think some people will try? They will try forever, but other people will hopefully take it and even if they have to give it a new name, go someplace with it. A Place that is, it is not about fitting into a box, but in fact it is exploring what are the possibilities of a boxless box? What happens if a box just will not be constrained that way? What if we thought it was a box? But guess what? It is actually not a box; it is a living form.

So, I think that contact is an emergent form and one of the things about emergent forms is you cannot tell where they will go. You cannot tell what they will become, you do not have that control, though you can create the score, all of us have this relation, but you cannot control what it will produce. How exciting, huh? That is called life.

Joaquín: Or one way of living life.

Nita: Yeah. Well, emergent forms are not one way of living life, I guess applied.

Joaquín: Well, there those who try to constrain them and there is also another way to live their experience.

Nita: If you try to constrain it, you kill it, you kill life itself.

Joaquín: Yes

Nita: I think it is really cool that you as a cognitive scientist are doing contact improv. I

think it is really exciting that you are an artist-scientist and that you are taking those forms and you are germinating, in a sense, one with the other because the sciences, they do not grow without creative practice, without creative mind. They have to have creativity and in this era these things have been separated tremendously. Sciences is as if it is afraid of its own creativity and arts are afraid of that which is this deep investigation in science, 'oh my god, do not constrain me to language'.

Joaquín:

So often they are only together because science is trying to explain what science can teach about arts, which I believe is a horrible approach.

Nita:

Exactly. It is a horrible approach.

Joaquín:

But I understand the inertia of science when they try to do that, is a common place, it is easy to go there

Nita: And in cognitive scientists decide, I am going to study you the dancer.

Joaquín: From a third point of view.

Nita: From a third point of view because; I am so objective', as you were pointing out.

Joaquín: Yes.

Nita: Yeah, yeah. So, I like the mess, I appreciate, I deeply appreciate the messiness of what you are stepping into. I really think it is absolutely, critically important to both the sciences and the arts. I do.

Transcripts: Joaquín Alfei and Harriet Roberts.