

Book Reviews

edited by Lianna Mark

***Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas* by David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith**

Holyoke, MA: Marcus Printing, 2008, 111 pp. (paperback)

By Kate Holden

I am deeply honored to revisit Nancy Stark Smith's work a year after her passing. Many are grieving and celebrating Nancy as an ancestor and a blessed memory. Comprising pages of photography and letters, *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas* by David Koteen and Nancy Stark Smith creates a sense of motion in its layout, through the sophisticated montage of a scrapbook-like archive, offering personal closeups, dynamic photographs, letters, and snapshots of Nancy's life.

Contact Improvisation (henceforth CI) is a dance form with multiple definitions. For Stark Smith, it is 'a duet movement form, originated in 1972 by choreographer Steve Paxton, based on the communication between two moving bodies and their combined relationship to the physical laws governing their motion-gravity, momentum, friction, inertia, centrifugal force, etc.' (xiii). The book acknowledges this, while stating that it is 'written from the experience of CI rather than about it', in order 'to further disseminate information about CI, with Nancy as the Medium' (vii). The book is non-linear in structure and divided into sections so that it can 'be dipped into at any point where it catches your interest' (1). These include prologues by both Koteen and Stark Smith, 'Nancy's Intro', 'What is CI?' (a series of definitions that demonstrates how the form has evolved), 'Views Through the Windshield' (a dialogue between Koteen and Stark Smith that constitutes the most substantial section of the book), 'Backwards'

(a reflective piece by Steve Paxton, in lieu of a conventional foreword), 'Underscore' (a dance improvisation score which is a compositional improvisational dance research tool), 'David's Epi-chrono-logue' (an avant-garde epilogue), 'Biographical notes' (on both authors), and a 'Birthday Poem' by Christina Svane.

In line with the stated intentions, the book employs Stark Smith as a medium. In 'Through the Windshield', she serves as an intermediary in conversation with Koteen to map the development of CI alongside her personal life. The dialogue is interspersed with 'talk bubbles', comprising commentary, memories, and well wishes from friends and esteemed dance colleagues such as Barbara Dilley and Ruth Zaporah. The paired photographs and interviews depict Stark Smith's turbulent childhood, her close relationship with her sister, and her iconic single braid serving as a metaphor for how she wove together threads of her life. In the interviews, she describes her adventurous summers at sleepaway camp, her love for gymnastics and athletics, and the death of her mother, who was a columnist at *Life* magazine.

The book also contains tender revelations. Stark Smith shares her understanding of personal love as 'backwards', implying its non-linear discovery in later life. She reflects on how she processed experiences somatically, thinking of how heartbreak and quitting smoking alike affected her body, thus demonstrating how intertwined her own body was with her body of work. The tonality of vulnerability and tenderness the book expresses aligns with the self-awareness required to practice CI, which relies on physical 'dialogue' with another person.

Nancy Stark Smith met Steve Paxton at Oberlin College, where she immediately championed the principles of CI communication: i.e., intimacy, self-awareness and the ability to challenge limits, to Paxton's surprise. He confesses: 'It had not occurred to me that such a rough and tumble dance would be of interest to a woman' (86). Through the subversion of expectations, she fostered collaboration, and expanded the form and her spirit of inclusivity with those who partake in it, as well as its dissemination.

Stark Smith successfully disseminated CI as a dance form, as well as a body of written discourse related to it. The ‘Biographical Notes’, which include a section titled ‘Continents not reached: Antarctica’, demonstrate how CI has gained traction globally. Moreover, *Caught Falling* discusses Stark Smith’s academic career, including her time at Oberlin, her studies in meditation with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and her work at the prestigious avant-garde Naropa University, including her transcription of Diane Di Prima’s poems, which catalysed her writing career. The book also evokes her career at Contact Quarterly, a journal she co-founded that describes itself as ‘a vehicle for moving ideas’ (87) and ‘a dance and improvisation journal’ (xii). It too contains a repository of information on the development of CI, as well other forms Stark Smith studied, such as Body-Mind Centering™.

The theoretical discourse she fostered is legible in the book through the contributions of letters and memories by other famed performance practitioners, dancers and Naropa teachers, such as Dilley and Zaporah, testifying to a creative lineage of women artists. Indeed, Stark Smith’s work is part of an active discourse and has overt influence on contemporary experimental dance scholarship. Dilley’s *This Very Moment: Teaching, Thinking, Dancing*, that chronicles the development of contemplative dance practice, as well as scores and exercises, is an example.

Examining *Caught Falling* at a time when, due to a pandemic, touch is so limited and community so constrained highlights the value of the liveness and dialogue CI has to offer. Mirroring the practice of CI, the book is an open invitation to the reader to engage in a dynamic dialogue with the work. CI has a transdisciplinary appeal, allowing *Caught Falling* to speak to a wide readership across dance, performance, embodiment practices, meditation, and somatic studies. The striking dance and personal photography and the unconventional design allow the book to transcend genre.

In a time of restrictions and limits, Nancy Stark Smith’s wisdom and principles of contact improvisation—i.e., ‘cooperation, spontaneity, responsibility, intelligence, innovation, invention, sensing self and

other, finding freedom inside limits, communication of support and change' (82)—serve as an invitation to 'dance with abandon safely' (5), to have grace, to pursue 'the coordination of the body with all forces of nature' (7), and to apply the principles of CI to the dance of living in wild times.

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Disabled Theatre edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz

Zurich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2015, 245 pp. (eText review copy)

By 'Tunde Awosanmi

Disabled Theatre (2015), which draws substantially on Jerome Bel's *Disabled Theatre*—a 2012/13 performance rupturing theatrical norms—celebrates the infrequent practice of granting liberty to disabled actors' creative intellect over an able director's creative power. Staging inclusive affirmation, Bel's *Disabled Theatre* brought together eleven cognitively disabled actor-dancers at the Theatre HORA, Zurich. The controversy and critical interventions ignited by this fruitful production, which *Disabled Theatre's* collected essays grapple with, testify to the theatre's interdisciplinary interface with disability studies from artistic, aesthetic, critical and spectatorial perspectives. Exploring the politics of ability versus disability, *Disabled Theatre* queries the theatre's status as a socio-cultural institution and disability's conceptual in/exclusivity. It toasts Bel's iconoclasm by documenting the actual performance and its reception.

Disabled Theatre comprises ten chapter-contributions by multi-disciplinary scholars and interviews with Jerome Bel and the eleven cognitively disabled actor-dancers, whose 'virtuoso dilettantism' in Bel's *Disabled Theatre* pragmatically accentuates Yoshi Oida's (1997) reflection on what acting should (not) be: 'displaying my technique. Rather [...] revealing [...] something that the audience doesn't encounter in daily life' (xvii). Structuring their 'Prologue' around the idea of 'Disabling the Theatre', the editors, Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, seek to do so by 'preventing theatre from working' and seizing 'power away from theatre until that point where it resists' (8).

Gerald Siegmund's contribution maps Bel's oeuvre through a series of comparisons, and presents his productions as strategically signifying the death of all theatre's tyrannical authorial forms, thus

echoing Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1979). This 'author de-authoring' paradigm antagonises the apparatus produced by the theatre's hierarchical power relations; constructs an aesthetics of dancers' bodies as cultural inscriptions; and locates the force of imagination in a performance's transformative power and in the performers' cultural intellect. The political currency of Bel's *Disabled Theatre* thus lies in its aesthetics which is projected through the correspondence between a set of three major paradoxical concepts: ability versus disability; difference versus indifference; and individual power versus communal power.

Leveraging the actor-dancers' self-introductory 'emancipatory speech act, "... and I am an actor"', Wihstutz probes four levels of the analysed production's emancipatory pungency: emancipation as an act of freedom and agency; emancipation as an act of self-distancing, that is gaining a fresh understanding of social reality by taking 'advantage of the aesthetic difference provided by the stage' (42); emancipation from conservative theatrical norms; and emancipation of aesthetic judgement—i.e., freedom from the conventional criteria of assessing stage skills, performer's achievement and actor's proficiency. Bel's *Disabled Theatre* conventionalises actor-disobedience through its insistence on self-determination and in-difference in revolt against the director's authority.

Bel's *Disabled Theatre* portrays the actors, through their unselfconsciousness, as both embodiments of a condition and paradigms of human vulnerabilities and imperfections. The performance's radical aesthetic approach has, consequently, informed Yvonne Rainer's perception that its style evokes a paradoxical feeling of 'discomfort', on the one hand, and 'longing', on the other hand, in the spectator (80). Influenced by Peter Sloterdijk's (2013) self-optimisation philosophy, Sandra Umatham concludes that Bel's *Disabled Theatre* is a self-transformational performance act. This is an endorsement of the actors' ingenuity 'in spite of their Down's syndrome or learning disabilities' (106). Kai van Enkels's piece is concerned about the challenges involved in featuring disabled persons in theatrical productions and the extent to which this could result in the spectator's incapacitation,

thus rendering the theatrical pact built on performance's aesthetic collectivism 'inoperative'. This surely calls for 'strategies of disabling' both the 'performers and the spectators' (123).

While non-neuronormative persons largely lack juridical and political representation, *Disabled Theatre* showcases actors as 'representing a community'. Responding to the tension generated by these 'two antithetical yet co-constitutive representational conditions' (142), André Lepecki problematises two antipodal terms — *minoritarianism*, following Gilles Deleuze, and *majoritarianism*. This conceptual mediation relies on Bel's three compositional codes: scenic *dispositif* (minimalist staging); score *dispositif* (strategic documentation of disabled actors' routine actions); and translation *dispositif* (formal translation from the actors' Swiss German to the audience's language). This liberates performances from 'ableist perceptive regimes' by privileging 'normative-abled-majoritarian subject' positions (159).

Kati Kros's contribution asserts that *Disabled Theatre* and Christoph Schlingensiefel's film, *Freakstars 3000*, are powerfully subversive and emancipatorily valuable artworks which, like *Beauty and the Beast* and *Regie*, have intensified the debate on the 'hierarchical dichotomy' between 'non-disabled' and 'disabled' (196). Lars Nowak interrogates polarised reception in Diane Arbus's 1950-70s 'freak photographs' alongside *Disabled Theatre*. The collaboration between abled photographer and disabled models in 'freak photography' is useful in framing discourses around ableism, disableism and monstrified bodies. Yvonne Schmidt metaphorically theorises the theatre's ideological 'free republic' status—as a rehearsal space for power relations, freedom and creative autonomy—drawing on Jerome Bel's production, *Freie Republik HORA*. Jana-Maria Stahl's interviews with the actors touch upon issues overlapping with the substance of the editors' interview with Jerome Bel. Highlighting his radical theatre praxis, the interviews navigate subjects like audience response and Bel's unique fourth wall deconstructive 'theatrical *dispositif*' approach (173).

Interspersing the chapters, translated from Swiss German into English by Christoph Nothlings, are photographs of the actors with

quotes. Far from mere illustrations, identity integration and authenticity reinforcement are indexed as ideological concepts underscoring both the performance and the book. However, this visual aspect of the book could have been accompanied by access to a recording of the performance for readers who have not seen the show. The omission makes this visual material feel incomplete.

Theatre's quintessence, enthuses Peter Brook (1995), resides 'within a mystery called the present moment' (97). Both Bel's *Disabled Theatre* and *Disabled Theatre* epitomise disability's present moment as an indispensable artistic genre and the counter-reality of ability. *Disabled Theatre* celebrates the humaneness of the disabled, the performance shared with the audience and the actors' families and advocates a canonisation of Bel's disabled theatrical aesthetics within the discipline alongside Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brook and others.

Benjamin Fraser expresses anxiety in *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics* (2018) that 'we risk condemning cognitive disability to a condition of both social and academic (in)visibility, and ... ceding the discursive control over experiences of cognitive disability from the humanities to the health and medical sciences' (6). *Disabled Theatre* freshly illuminates fundamental disability performance aesthetic and sociological issues; constructs a novel performative template for disability studies, advocacy and identity politics; and deflates the disciplinary arrogance of the social and medical models. As a work of scholarship, it affirms theatre's collaborative and inter-disciplinary openness. Preempting Fraser already in 2015, *Disabled Theatre* was working to wrest 'discursive control' of 'the social constructedness of disability over the experience of disability from ableist power structures' (5).

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Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common by Harmony Bench

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 256 pp. (paperback)

By Rachael Davies

Harmony Bench sets the tone for what is to be explored in the pages to follow by opening the introduction of *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures and the Common* with an account of *Passe-Partout* (2014) produced by 2wice Arts Foundation. Comprehensive descriptions of digital dance works like this one structure the book and are central to its narrative and analysis. These accounts act as an intimate device allowing the reader to experience the works through Bench's personal encounter with them. More broadly, *Perpetual Motion* provides a rich historical account of the development of dance and its relationship to digital media from 1996 to 2006. It approaches the subject of dance in the digital sphere from a personal and communal perspective, relating individual concerns to wider political issues. For Bench, digital technologies have 'thoroughly saturated the practices, creation, distribution, and viewers' experiences of dance' (3), and it is from this point that the book begins its narrative. Published prior to the coronavirus pandemic, this proposition is now all the timelier.

Chapter One is set in a pre-social media era, focusing on artists' exploration of the early web and the format of CD-ROMs. More specifically, Bench provides an analysis of what she terms hyperdances—'choreographies created for computational devices... that support user interaction but do not incorporate user-generated content' (20)—with a focus on *Somnambules* (2003) by Nicolas Clauss, Jean-Jacques Birgé, and Didier Silhol. The theme of this analysis is repetition, and it is grounded in a theoretical framework primarily comprising Gilles Deleuze's analysis of difference and repetition, and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal return. From this first chapter, Bench assesses the role and responsibility of the internet and digital technologies, not just

with regard to dance practices but to society more broadly. Drawing on Roland Barthes, Bench explores the notion that in interacting with digital texts users can be ‘emancipated from their previous roles as mere consumers and passive spectators’ (25), whilst reminding us at the same time that, in the context of hyperdances, it is important to make the distinction between interactions with digital works that can make a difference to their reading and those that cannot. The question of freedom and liberty in the commons is an invigorating debate that runs through the book.

Chapter Two encapsulates some of the most urgent questions about our individual and collective being in common space. It highlights a series of case studies: solo and group performances taking place from 2008 to 2013, with a primary focus on *Girl Walk// All Day* (2011-12), directed by Jacob Krupnick, with lead performer Anne Marsen. Bench’s selection of works take place in a post-9/11 world. Central to their analysis is thus the freedoms of movement, gathering, and being in public space when threats of ‘domestic and international terrorism are cited as reasons to control and limit where, when and how people move through open spaces and transit sites’ (55). Bench proposes that dance in public holds the potential to facilitate ‘the renewal of social bonds’ (68), particularly in light of oppressive governmental strategies, threats of terrorism, social injustice, and inequality. It is a bold statement but perhaps, now, never truer. We have become more aware of our bodies in relation to space, place, and others—online and offline—than ever before.

Whereas Chapter Two focuses on works made in the locale, the attention of Chapter Three turns to work made for a much wider audience—‘a global or planetary common’ (106). This includes dance works produced, composed, as well as circulated globally on the internet. YouTube is an exemplary platform for this, and it is on the YouTube series *Where the Hell is Matt?* by Matt Harding that Bench focuses her analysis, making the case that, through works such as this, artists are ‘attempting to make-world from the space of globalization’ (101). The works considered here rely on crowdsourcing; Bench weighs

up historical critique of participatory, relational, and socially engaged practices through the work of Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) and Claire Bishop (2004), and in doing so touches on some of the ethical concerns surrounding it. Whilst she argues that the works discussed in the chapter involve participants to create ‘a world from the crowd’ (104) rather than exploit them (Bishop 2004; Harvie 2013), the pandemic has been a stark reminder of the limitations of the ‘worlds’ that can be created online, who they serve, and who they exclude. One thus has to interrogate the ‘global or planetary common’ that these artists are striving for—whether such a thing exists, or whether it inevitably ends up, in Bishop’s words, ‘duplicating the structures of neo-liberal capitalism, requiring affective investments and uncompensated labour as part of a larger “experience economy”’ (qtd. in Bench 103).

Issues of authorship and accreditation are significant considerations in the world of participatory and digital art and Bench continues to explore this in Chapter Four with *24 Hours of Happy* (2013) by Pharrell Williams. The final chapter succinctly brings together technological developments in digital dance practice and Bench’s theoretical analysis in a way that unifies the central concerns of the book through historical analysis. In doing so, it brings to the surface some of the most urgent questions posed by dance today. This book is not only an important contribution to dance history and discourse, but an eloquently curated study, bringing together an eclectic selection of digital works that demonstrate dance’s relationship to, and development alongside, the digital, and how we as interactors have contributed to it.

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An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences by John Lutterbie

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020, 198 pp. (paperback)

By Christina Regorosa

An Introduction to Theatre, Performance and the Cognitive Sciences is part of the 'Performance and Science: Interdisciplinary Dialogues' series, exploring current practices in the performing arts in light of research carried out in cognitive science. The endeavour is timely, and the interest mutual, as cognitive scientists too have been turning to the arts to investigate the human mind—in the field of neuroaesthetics, for example, or in creativity research. It is no easy task to synthesise insights derived from fundamentally different epistemic cultures, and the authors and scientists who endeavour nonetheless to bridge these gaps—not only between theory and practice, but also between arts and science—deserve genuine recognition for their efforts.

Lutterbie conceptualises this introduction as an exploration of how arts and science can productively communicate with each other (3). Chapter by chapter, the author walks the reader through a selection of concepts from different disciplines: from cognitive science (Chapter One); via culture, as defined by cultural studies (Chapter Two); and the relevant aspects of theatre: namely, space, time, and text (Chapters Three-Five); to aesthetics (Chapter Six). He draws throughout on the work of scholars in cognitive science, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy alike. In Chapters Three-Six, he generously shares his experience of various genres and works of theatre—be it as spectator, actor, or director—to illustrate the point at hand. In addition to these concepts and portrayals of his personal experiences, there are reflection tasks in each chapter to help the reader engage directly with theoretical concepts. These tasks are one of the book's strongest features, in their offering an experiential approach to the outlined theories.

For example, in Chapter One Lutterbie frames theatre and performance as a dynamic system (21), which is a mathematical concept used in cognitive science. To illustrate why, he shares his own experience of directing a piece in which a planned fog-effect did not always work out due to the temperature changes in the theatre (20). In task 3, he asks the reader to think of other kinds of dynamic systems in which they are involved, to then define boundary conditions, control parameters, and perturbations (23).

However, perhaps due to the impressively broad range of elements included in this exploration, it remains somewhat unclear what exactly the concrete merits of a productive communication between arts and science are. Lutterbie claims that there ‘is a brave new world at the intersection of art and science that can help us understand the creative act, making us better artists and audiences’ (181), but at the same time admits that his take is merely ‘a sketch, a pencil drawing’ (180). Nonetheless, projects like this are indispensable, particularly as evolving branches of cognitive science—like the enactive approach and neurophenomenology—turn to lived human experience. Since theatre offers case studies of condensed human experience, it is an interesting field for the study of human cognition.

From a cognitive science perspective, there are a few points that merit further reflection. One thing the book does *not* offer is a concise differentiation of the various paradigms within cognitive science. While the author does state that this field is interdisciplinary (15), no mention is made of the earlier cognitivist approach, which is—broadly speaking—in opposition to embodied, enactive, extended, and embedded approaches that Lutterbie often refers to. The omission of the differing stances within the field gives the false impression that it is homogeneous in its premises and suppositions. This becomes problematic when, for example, he claims that the notion of embodied cognition is one of the foundational concepts of his book (26), but then uses terminology that is inherently cognitivist, and therefore at odds with his claim. For example, to use the terms ‘data’ or ‘message’ to indicate the electrochemical signals in neurons (40, 55) implies that

cognition is being conceptualised through the mind-as-computer metaphor, which characterise a cognitivist stance. This inconsistent use of terminology stemming from differing paradigms gives an impression of eclecticism to readers familiar with cognitive science.

Another weakness is that sometimes the conclusions the author draws are reductionist (again, in opposition with his stated embodiment foundation). For example, in explaining how predominant techniques in America made space for different acting styles, he concludes: ‘Through the change in neural synapses and communicating these changing beliefs [...], the culture is changing’ (60). Statements like these overlook a central question in cognitive science, the so-called explanatory gap: how can electrochemical signals account for all the various experiences we are able to make as human beings? In what way is the level of action potentials related to meaning in the social domain? Equating ‘change in neural synapses’ with ‘changing beliefs’ simply ignores this gap, when it is precisely this issue that would benefit from inputs from the humanities and arts.

This much-needed collaboration becomes particularly obvious in the field of neuroaesthetics. In Chapter Six, Lutterbie takes a critical stance against the neuroscientific investigations of the biological bases of aesthetic experience. He conveys vividly and convincingly what an aesthetic experience of theatre and performance entails. In describing his own through a phenomenological lens, he demonstrates how arts can illuminate cognitive neuroscience (conversely to the book’s stated intent). Neuroaesthetics had been overly focused on beauty in its inception phase, which is only a part of aesthetic experience. By offering an account of aesthetics that is temporal, and consisting of stages such as expectation, defamiliarisation, and (dis)fluency (171), he hints at the complexity of the aesthetic experience that neuroscientists should consider. He thus implicitly points to an intersection in which a productive communication between science and arts is key.

Despite these weaknesses, the author does justice to the declared aim of the book. It introduces theories and concepts from the humanities as well as from the cognitive sciences in an approachable

and personal manner. For cognitive scientists, this book will shed light on the ways in which their discipline is being received in the arts and humanities, and where crucial misunderstandings linger. For practitioners and scholars of theatre, it is a wayfare (13) through the landscape of theatre, with an outlook on an array of different views from cognitive science. It is an exploration that expands the horizon of the mindscape in merging arts, humanities, and cognitive science.

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