

Dear Iris,

Please find below my report for the trip I did to the U.S.A. last November and December thanks to the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund. This has been a fantastic trip and I am so grateful to the Fund for enabling me to develop my practice in such a rich way. I do not yet have video material but some documentation has been made by one of my peers and if I can I will share some of it with the fund once it is available.

Huge thanks,

Anne-Gaelle Thiriot

Report for Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund

My dance training hasn't involved much ballet compared to the majority of my female peers. A jazz, tap dance and martial arts student in my childhood and teens, I discovered Limón and release contemporary dance, and Contact Improvisation (CI) as I had already started scientific studies in Geology in my early 20s. I remember this encounter as very moving and intriguing. After this, I went on to do a vocational training at Trinity Laban and to develop as a contemporary dancer, performer, teacher and maker, while keeping CI and releasing techniques an important part of my practice. The investigative approach of the form very much suits me and I keep learning and developing through practicing with my peers, teachers and students, continuously. However, there is something very special about coming to the country where a form originally developed and by working closely with one of its pioneers. The sensation of rooting one's experience appears. This is what I got a chance to do at the end of 2018.



Nancy Stark Smith in the 70s, in one of the Glimpse projects and in nature (both around 2014, external sources)

Nancy Stark Smith was one of the first people involved in the development and touring of Contact Improvisation, a post-modern dance practice that appeared in 1972 and initiated by Steve Paxton, as he was on a residency in Oberlin College. Since 72 she has relentlessly kept the practice going, researching, performing, teaching and facilitating Contact Improvisation events all over the world, evolving in and refining her own dance and Buddhist practice at the same time. I met Nancy as she came to the UK in 2012 to share her practice of the Underscore, "a framework for practicing dance and improvisation that [she's] been developing

since the early 1990s.” It is a score that “can be seen as a vehicle for incorporating Contact Improvisation (CI) into a broader arena of improvisational practice”.



Originally a descriptive score, it has a huge practical research content, and I have found it an infinite resource on experimenting with body, relationships, group dynamics, and composition. It is also a very interesting framework to work on musicality, a field not always very present in contemporary dance improvisation material as a very crafted feature, although there is a tradition of improvising to famous set pieces of music (such as the Goldberg Variations). After meeting and studying with Nancy a few times in Europe, I got invited to join the Glimpse project in the U.S.A.

Glimpse is a model exploring dance improvisation and CI through the lens of the Underscore with a retreat, residency, performance, and community Underscores, by a group of experienced and committed dancers and improvisers. The vision is that Glimpse will continue in different locations with same and different dancers committed to the practice over time. Last December 2018 was the fourth iteration of the Glimpse Project and it happened in Salt Lake City, Utah. The previous versions happened in California, New York and Seattle.

The Underscore is most and foremost a research practice, it is therefore rarely witnessed from the outside. The challenge of the Glimpse project is to give justice to the depth of the process and research while giving an interesting experience to the watchers.

I left London on 25 November, and thanks to a stop-over in Seattle, got the chance of exploring the city’s dance scene for a few days, and visit a couple of practitioners of the same generation as Nancy Stark Smith, before joining the ranks of the Glimpsers in Salt Lake City on 1 December. Our project lasted until the 17th of December, including two public performance-installations of the work on 14 and 15 Dec. Here is an account of my dancing time in the North-West Pacific Coast and in Utah.

Seattle and North-West Pacific Coast:

As I arrived in Seattle, I got to meet quite soon with CI pioneer Nita Little. She wasn’t teaching in the period that I came so we went for a long walk in the Japanese Kabota Gardens and discussed her experience and perspective on the practice of Contact Improvisation (Nita was arguably the first woman to be involved in Contact Improvisation, before it even had a name, and she remembers some of the early CI

experiments as attempts to stay together -physically- without manipulating each other). We also discussed her own PhD research on Ensemble Intelligence and the development of dancers as experts in neuro-plasticity.

I was touched to hear and feel how radical was her thinking, her dedication to questioning and teaching how to question, and the on-going interest she manifested for peripheral intelligence: the intelligence of the periphery and of the margins as opposed to its control by an intelligence, and for the plurality of these forms of intelligence.



“A little bow”

A couple of days later I got to meet Joan Hanna and Karen Nelson at Hanna’s Barn on Vashon Island, a studio facing back to the sea built by Hanna herself, which is also now a residency space for international and local artists. I arrived early to do a Morning Contemplative Dance Practice with them, a practice originally developed by Barbara Dilley which involves a sitting meditation, followed by a personal awareness practice or solo warm-up, and a group practice called “Open Space”. Then the practice concludes with reflecting and sharing. During the ‘Open Space’ the practitioners alternate the roles of doer and witness by entering from the edges of the space, and by either bowing in or bowing out. *“A little bow, it’s incredible all of what’s contained in a little bow”,* Joan tells me: *“a deference to the space, an acknowledgment of all people, and of all forces playing us”*. We are about 7 people for this 2.5 hour morning practice, and the sharing is full of generosity and humour. “And a little bit of magic” she adds. Dancing with Karen Nelson and her passion for dance and performance under all and any circumstances was very moving. She wrote me a postcard.



Before and after the practice at Hanna’s Barn

Salt Lake City, Utah

The big part of the journey was my trip in Utah, where I joined 9 other practitioners to research, practice and question the Underscore and its methodologies of practice, as a springboard for two performance-installations. The project also included two Community Underscores facilitated by us and open to the general public, and a jam, which we all attended.

This version was directed remotely by Nancy Stark Smith and co-created by the ten of us on all the practical aspects. Due to practical circumstances, Nancy could not be in the room with us. However, she designed the whole project and its schedule with the two organisers, and we spent time practicing and discussing with her, via Skype. This of course had its inconveniences, but her presence was very felt all the time, in all the words, formats of practice and ethos of the work, as well as in the physicality of every single dancer, for having danced with her over a substantial period of time.

Those two weeks of intense practice, analysis, reflection, consultation, experimentation and living together, have affected me profoundly and allowed me to develop on a steep learning curve on my artistic path. We generally spent about 10h everyday involved in the process of researching our practice, as we were in all the time.

The group ended up being composed of Katherine Cook, Rachael Lincoln, Scott Davies from Seattle, Ronja Ver from Oakland (originally from Finland), Anne Cooper from Vancouver Canada, Elise Knudson from New York, the two organisers Brandin Steffensen from Oklahoma and Leah Nelson Del Porto from Salt Lake City, and myself.



Leah Del Porto watching, Rachael Lincoln, Ronja Ver, Anne Cooper, Katherine Cook

The Underscore is a visual and verbal structure, which developed from practice. It contains elements that are attempting to define aspects of a movement practice, which by nature cannot be defined only by words. The Underscore has a strong Buddhist philosophy underlying the practice of jamming and approaching improvisation, relationships, dancing and micro/macro-events. I guess it is anchored in the impermanent nature of our activities and environments, and roots back to important principles that unite us and it all: gravity, presence, intuition, fluxes, trajectories, impermanence among others; therefore it invites us to notice and acknowledge these principles and let them be part of our choice-making. The Underscore is composed of 22+ phases that are in part chronological and in part can happen at any time and all the time. It is a description of what tends to

happen and has now become a framework to study collective embodied instant composition.

Physically the work goes back to the roots of Contact Improvisation and it feels incredibly good and challenging to go back to the basics and investigate them again and again. Like one does a ballet barre, doing one or more underscores everyday (my post-modern barre!) I reset my body and my perception and made myself available for anything.

Our schedule was pretty full, and although some early morning practices were optional, they encouraged you to make clear choices from wake up. Everyday, a Contemplative Dance Practice hour was beginning the day for those up for it at 8.30am. My Canadian roommate Anne and I managed to attend almost all of them, and they stuck with me as one of the most touching regular events and a crucial part of the process. To catch your dance partners -who you will work, discuss, negotiate, compose, build, perform and enter in friction and in bonding with during the day- in a silent waking up state is very vulnerable and raw. It gave time to see our inner states, the landscape around us, the snow, the trees, the windows, hear the sounds around, the business, the birds, the silence on the days of snow, the absences. The poetic contents unfolded in that moment for me, before we all became smarter, inquisitive and productive as the day went on.

All the practices we did came from Nancy's development of scores to support CI, and improvisation dancing, where we get a chance to see people for who they are. One of my favourite that we practiced was "Come As You Are".

In CAYA three dancers start soloing at the same time.

They have 2 ½ min to touch the wall on the other side of the room.

They practice transparency and a ratio of 85% attention to their own thing, and 15% to the other two.

Those three simple rules give way to entire afternoons of practice, which showed more and more layers of each individual.

In this kind of work, permeability to your surroundings plays a big part: the nursery school next door definitely had some influence on us, first by playing a combination of children songs and pop music all day. Seeing lines of little boots neatly organised every morning softened us all, as well as the regularly surprising entries of one or a grapple of the kids through the door as we were in the middle of a practice session.



In the studio and the outskirts of Salt Lake City

Being part of a group with so much experience I have learnt a lot from dancing in close contact (literally!) with every single one of the dancers, about intention, communication, rhythm, sophistication, simplicity, exposure, playfulness, clarity, artistry and politics. I must admit that it has once more made me fall in love with the practice of dancing and all the deep notions that we deal with when we dance, with a light heart. Most often the qualities that dancers intrinsically develop in their practice, particularly over time -adaptability and flexibility, sense of aesthetics, discipline, collaboration, commitment, resilience, empathy, generosity, reliability, understanding by doing, intuition, responsibility, rigor, curiosity- have all ability to provide society with a liant and with innovation, but they are not often given enough time to do that. To be able to really feel the value of these aspects in the process has been invaluable for me, particularly in a place where the arts get little to no support, making it very hard for any artist to survive.

I learnt a lot about how one meets an edge physically, mentally, emotionally, compositionally, as we kept practicing at a high level of enquiry. How much my language, my attitude and my philosophy towards the practice do affect my actions, in my dancing and in my life! Nancy Stark Smith's positivity and insatiable curiosity for details in the doing after all these years of practice has been one of my main learnings and inspirations. You have to love the process again and again, even when everyone involved has so much commitment to the product, the performance, the form of the dance style, the ways of practicing (including some more ritualistic aspects) and the ways of relating to an audience to not alienate them; its all about the process. We considered audience members as intelligent individuals who don't need to be spelled out anything even if they see this kind of work for the first time; yet there was a need and requirement for total transparency from the performer and the collective to enable the audience to make their own interpretation of what they see. This, in a completely improvised performance, was demanding and exciting. The way Nancy names and analyses what's going on - her interest in bringing in always more simple ideas, but that are not necessarily easy to realise or develop. Staying simple and readable while having a multitude of details available to feed the practice of the day.



Space set up and warm-up before performance

I tried to challenge myself in the course of this process and decided to make some facilitation proposals in the course of our process, as well as being responsible with two peers for the set-up and looks of the performance space.

One of my personal highlights was getting us ready for the last performance through a light facilitation. It felt like a big responsibility although it would have probably worked without me too... I loved the feeling of facilitating this moment just before going public, realising that part of the performance is already happening as we open ourselves for the unimaginable, keep bonding, notice the funny details of where we are in the moment. And then unleash and relax into it, let the work be bigger than us.

I loved the performances. They happened as part of the process. I always get a buzz in performance, and I will remember vividly these ones for many reasons, in particular because of how vulnerable and strong I have let myself be in front of an audience, and the group was supporting this.





Extract and 'finale' of the last performance (pictures by Christopher Slater)

A touching comment from an audience member was that she felt a lot of different emotions as a viewer. Many things happen at once in this work so a viewer has to make choices to what they attend to. She mentioned being very amused by a playful dance, and then turning her head and seeing one movement made by two dancers very close to her, which moved her to tears. For having practiced and watched improvisation in performance for quite a few years I haven't often had and heard this feeling, so it seemed that we got somewhere. This reminded of why I particularly love this kind of work and the ethos behind it.

Here a short review of the performance:

<http://lovedancemore.org/reviews/2018/12/17/glimpse-4-contact-improvisation-event>

There are too many things to mention, but some of the words that were mentioned almost everyday in this project were:

"Freedom and responsibility", towards oneself and towards the group

"The colonised body": by whom and how is our body colonised and how do we colonise others? How does one acknowledge their own heritage, including the unwanted history?

"Simple Complex Simple" (a compositional tool from composer Mike Vargas, a close collaborator of Nancy Stark Smith) – our process, our mind-body relationship, our selves, our group, what we produce, how we approach viewers, etc.

"Bigger than us"

"Failing better"

Composition, intentions, decisions are all principles that are not often witnessed all together. In this group, we dealt with all of these at once. Any time and all the time. We evolved in a democratic set-up with a clear aim to achieve, yet a changeable form.

Another of my favourite moments were the Community events, when our practice met the local practice and we saw the repercussions of what we do on other people directly. I have huge respect for all of my colleagues and peers; we shared our joy of

dancing even more directly in this context than in performance, and this was particularly strong because it was actually democratic.



some feedback after one of the performances (one of the performers was pregnant)

I have been discreetly wowed by the way my peers from the U.S. had both some big vision and did the daily efforts required to fulfil it, without complaining; actually even loving the daily labour. Just loving the working, the working out and the figuring it out.

I have some plans to share what my experience has been in a very practical way, alongside my enthusiastic informal chats with friends and peers. With Colleen Bartley, a CI veteran and Contact Quarterly co-editor, we are planning a whole year of Underscore practice to initiate new people and to reignite the flame of former practitioners. I am also imagining -for the moment only in my fantasy- proposing to do a European version of Glimpse some time soon. Most likely in the UK, which for me will always stay a part of what is broadly called Europe.

I would definitely recommend keeping a few days before and after the project to have time to appreciate the surroundings of your activity, they also are part of your learning. As I caught up with one of my London colleagues from Candoco Dance Company (visiting his family in Utah for Christmas), I learnt to drive an American automatic car on the highway -6 lanes in one direction! definitely a most impressive achievement for who knows my driving- on my way to The Arches National Park in the South of Utah, adding a short but proper American road trip to my experience.



Arches National Park, Utah

I would hugely like to thank the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund for allowing me to do such a rich journey and go through what felt like a rite of passage. I hope opportunities to get back to the USA will materialise, but in any case I will never forget this journey.