



## INTER-VIEWS with Nina Martin

by Jennifer Keller, Melinda Buckwalter,  
and Nancy Stark Smith

*What follows is an interweaving of two interviews with Nina Martin. The first was done in May 2006 in Toronto, at the Festival for Interactive Physics, with Melinda Buckwalter and Nancy Stark Smith for CQ. The second interview was conducted, transcribed, and edited by Nina's longtime colleague Jennifer Keller on September 11, 2006. The collected interview materials were enormously rich and varied. Below are excerpts chosen and edited by CQ in collaboration with Nina.*

*[above] Nina Martin in her Diametric Discourse, at CounterPULSE in San Francisco, December 1, 2006.*

**In your ReWire: Dancing States system, you work a lot with the body-brain relationship. What started that research?**

**Nina:** The impetus for my study of improvisation was to deepen my knowledge about what happens when we improvise. I grew interested in the speed of the brain and the inevitable slowness of the body in comparison, and the speed of the brain of the observer. I realized that as an improviser I was actually working with the speed of the observer's perception, which was *daunting*.

Studying and dancing with Mary Overlie was very important for me. There was one piece where we were supposed to sit and wait for something to happen onstage. We rehearsed it a little and performed it once. That experience stayed with me. At the same time, I was studying Kinetic Awareness—Elaine Summers's work—with Frances Becker. This was in the mid-'80s.

From these investigations, I developed what I call ReWire: Dancing States. Mary's "waiting to do something"

investigations brought me into what I now call the Neuro State—trying to move from the brain, as fast as the brain. Elaine Summers's "Letting the body stretch itself" exercise brought me into what I call the Kinetic State—moving from the body.

**Was your question how to tighten up the bodily reaction time? Were you interested in getting the slowness of the body to match the agility of the brain?**

Or more, how do you develop the ability to improvise that doesn't include deliberation? In order to be fast, you have to be firing in a way that doesn't allow you to study and judge and then decide what your reaction is going to be. You're trying to move from a preconscious state.

**How does your ensemble work help develop this skill?**

You can take this "brain time" sensibility into your ensemble work. One way is to train in a number score. I think this originally came from Anne Bogart. Because in improv we don't know what the future is, we tend to be "glacial" in our timing—things happen slowly, they evolve; testing the waters, so to speak. It's natural, but I ask, "Well, can we change that? Can we act as a group and do something fast together? Can we make decisions quickly? How do you get that to happen? Can we execute a jump cut as a group?"

The number score: you have six pieces of paper representing six sections of an improvisation. Each paper has a number on it representing the number of performers: zero means clear space, one means a solo, and so on. So you make a series of random numbers, tape the papers up on the wall, and perform that sequence. You don't worry about *what* you do, you are just fulfilling the number. So if it's a three and there are three people in, as soon as another person comes in, it pushes the whole group forward into the next section of the score, the next number. It's incredibly arbitrary and unartful.

**You're not working off the content of what's happening...**

No, it's just strictly bodies and numbers. It's just training you to notice and act quickly. You're not going in because you're inspired to or because you've seen something that you connect with; you just throw that away and go in because that's what the score says to do. You go in and *then* figure it out, and then get out. If there is any confusion, you go forward to the next number.

The next step is to imagine that there is always a number score—and really, there always is! When the numbers are taken down, the ensemble can continue to maintain the

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## Finding my way in Marfa

by Heidi Henderson

In the spring of 2006, I traveled to Texas to take part in the first March to Marfa, a gathering of improvisers facilitated by Nina Martin. The participants were mainly people who have worked extensively with Nina, with a few exceptions.

A three-hour drive from the El Paso airport takes us through beautifully empty country—dry, brown, with tumbleweeds and antelope that are so much smaller than I imagined them—past the fake Prada store on the side of the road, and at last into Marfa, a small town that has become an unlikely enclave of art since Donald Judd created the Chinati Foundation there in 1979.

On the first day, after a morning of meeting each other, we assemble in the afternoon at the local Vets hall. I know I am in Texas because there is a horse at the bank across the street. The hall is a big room with a beautiful wooden floor and photos covering the walls of all the soldiers from Marfa. We check in with some Nina scores, since some of us, like me, are totally unfamiliar. These scores provide me with a first glimpse of her toolbox of ideas.

We start with Nina's "Fussy" score: Lying on the floor, rearranging the body in space. Bursts of movement with no intention. Nina says, "Don't get comfortable in any place. Keep shifting; do not go into vocabulary, do not go into interest. This is like training yourself in randomness." I feel like a bag of body parts. How freeing this feels to do. There is no judgment about the individual places I go to. But there is a wrong way to do Fussy. And despite Nina's warning that "no's" come with her training, I am struck by the unfamiliarity of this word for me in teaching improvisation.

Later, we do longer dances. No structure other than time and edges to the space: there is a front, there are sides, maybe 30 feet wide by 20 feet deep. There is an audience (everyone who is not dancing) in folding chairs along the front edge. Three groups dance for 20 minutes each.

At some point in our group's dance, I join Andrew Marcus in his arm movement. After all the dances, we talk. I say that when I consciously repeat

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possibilities for fast transitions. It helps people not get stuck in the improv, as often happens. It's a bit arbitrary, but what's important is dynamic shifts. Amazing dancing can result from this simple structure.

### **Why do you engage in both improvisation and choreography? What draws you to each form?**

I've always choreographed and improvised right along. I like to think that I choreograph my improvisations and I improvise my choreography. I hate the distinction between the two. Some things work much better improvised, and other things work better tightly set. Whatever works is what you do; they are just different places in the continuum of deliberation.

In Channel Z, I had some colleagues that were on the pure improvisation side of the spectrum and other colleagues that were choreographing. Inside that group there was never a sense that one was more appropriate than the other. As artists we are free to use whatever tool is available. In one of my very early Channel Z experiences, some Contact Improvisation dancers from California came and asked a few of us to perform with them in NYC. When we got offstage, one of the California dancers was really angry. He said, "There was A LOT of modern dance and gesture out there!" That was a really important moment for me because I thought, "Hmmm...uh oh....you mean there's something we can't do out there? We can't? We're so free and there are things we cannot do?" So, early on, I rejected that purist Contact aesthetic. I didn't reject the form, just a narrow definition of it.

### **Can you tell us more about your experience with Channel Z and its influence on Ensemble Thinking?**

In the mid-1980s I was working with Channel Z, a group of NYC Contact teachers brought together by Robin Feld. Channel Z was a forum for thinking deeply about improvisation. I like to tell the story that I learned to improvise by coming offstage and saying, "Well, that's not it," and after the next performance, "That certainly can't be it." And by process of elimination, I finally got to this place of "Oh, that's it." But what is that? How do you create tools to consistently get there?

In Channel Z, it became obvious fairly quickly that we weren't doing "straight Contact," as in a round-robin—where mostly when you're on the side, you're "offstage." So one of the first things we did was to understand that there's no "off." If you're visible, you are "on." We performed in a gallery with people coming in and out, and we talked about how the



photo © Margaret Paek

Nina Martin and Andrew Wass improvising at the Amvets building in Marfa, Texas; March 2007.

audience was editing their own experience—they would look and shift and decide what they were looking at. We talked about taking more responsibility for that process ourselves.

So the idea of working compositionally was present early on. I continued developing those ideas in my work outside of Channel Z, and this eventually became Ensemble Thinking.

### **Did Channel Z establish scores that you used regularly?**

Not really. We would rehearse structures that would present themselves in performance and that we could identify and work with—Oh, this is the line dance, or this is the Persian Miniature structure. We usually would choreograph the first half almost like a piece, tightly structured, and then the second half would be open. We would do things like—the second half starts, and whatever you do in the first minute is what you're going to do for the whole piece. Jane Blount later named that the Economy Score—to not just keep going into new material endlessly but rather forcing yourself to stay and really work out the variations.

### **Were there other early influences on the development of Ensemble Thinking?**

I remember starting to emphasize in my Contact classes—after we'd open up into jamming—that you don't just gain value when you find your partner; you have value coming in and going out as a soloist. I started to be more than just technical in teaching Contact.

Later, I was fortunate to be able to work with students for extended periods at the ImpulsTanz Festival in Vienna;

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