

Some thoughts on Nancy Stark Smith's UnderScore

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This is a two-part article that I wrote about Nancy Stark Smith's UnderScore. Part One might be of interest to anyone who have heard of the UnderScore and might be curious to hear a bit about its history and how I use it for myself. Part Two consists of my critical reflections on the UnderScore. In order to understand them then you need to be familiar with the underscore already. If you are not familiar with it and are curious, you can do no better than take a workshop with Nancy herself.

Part One: A Brief Personal History Of Nancy Stark Smith's UnderScore

I first studied with Nancy at the SNDO in Amsterdam in 1994. I was attracted by her reputation as one of the most experienced teachers of contact improvisation. I can't remember whether we worked with what came to be known as the UnderScore in that workshop, but I think we at least touched on it.

My first deep immersion in the world of the UnderScore was in Arlequi in 1996 – except it wasn't called that then. It was “Nancy's score”, known to those who studied with her simply as “the score”. Asked to explain it to those who hadn't worked with Nancy, somehow it became “The Score” which maybe lead to a period when it seemed to take on something of a “cult” status – at least that's how some people within the contact community who hadn't worked with Nancy and her score sometimes described it.

Nancy took some time to find a name it, insisting that it should be “written in the sand”, never written down except in the act of explaining it to others. In her insistence that it should be passed down as “oral history” rather than “written in stone”, I believe that she succeeded in something very special; that everyone who has worked with it has their own individual understanding of it and special relationship to it.

This is how I remember Nancy explaining how the UnderScore came to be born. In the early days of contact improvisation, she struggled with teaching the form. She talked of feeling confused about her teaching. It was early days and much of the material that we contact teachers take for granted had yet to be invented. Improvisation is hard to teach at the best of times, but here was a form whose focus on skin-to-skin full-body contact was (and still is) a cultural challenge and whose dynamic interdependence brings safety issues. I remember Steve Paxton saying his biggest interest in teaching contact is to insure personal safety.

What Nancy began to discern was an organising principal underlying her teaching. Working consciously with this pattern supported her teaching and that pattern then evolved into her “score”, now known as the UnderScore.

Somewhere along the line she started to dance her “score” as an improvisational score in itself. In her workshops, she offers not only the teaching of technical contact improvisation skills but also a number of scores in which to practice contact improvisation and related improvisational skills. The UnderScore is special in that it creates a container for the whole group to practice CI together. For those who haven't experienced it, you can think of it as a focused jam performed as both personal and group research into contact improvisation and its associated phenomena.

In the January workshop of 2000, I was a bit stunned (and a bit relieved) to hear Nancy describe contact improvisation as “a hippy martial art”. It was a product of its times and that is both a key to its beauty and maybe she suggested a major shortcoming. Those times were the late sixties and early seventies, and the counter-culture from which contact improvisation sprang was not so keen on rules. That said, many of those involved in its early development were studying Aikido which, while oriental, esoteric and exotic, is nonetheless highly structured and maybe benefits from this clear marking of boundaries.

She went on to paint a funny picture of contact improvisation taught and practiced within an Aikido-like structure: you go in and bow to a picture of Steve Paxton, you then bow to the teacher and the teacher bows to the students, before practicing you bow to your partner and they bow to you, and same again after you finish.

In some way, I see the UnderScore as Nancy’s attempt to create a clear structure for the practice of contact improvisation that holds true to the freedom of its birth.

So what is this UnderScore?

There's no definitive answer to this question. All I have to say has to be prefaced by an all-encompassing, for me ...

So, for me, the UnderScore creates frame of reference for the practice of contact improvisation. It delineates phases that can occur in the experience of a group, in the experience of an individual and some that apply to both. This frame of reference can be projected forward in time to plan classes or how to approach jam situations, and it can also be applied retrospectively in order to be able to reflect on experiences that arose in those situations.

Above all, I find it creates a workable language with which I can communicate with others about physical (somatic) experiences which often seem to occur outside the realm of language. For me it is above all else an awareness practice.

How do I make use of my experience of the UnderScore?

In Nancy’s Workshops: This is the source of my understanding of the UnderScore. This is how I was introduced to it and formed my own relationship to it. Until recently, with the exception of Vellexon 2004, Reichenow 2006 and Arlequi 2012 UnderScore group meetings, and some rare teaching opportunities where I was able to work intensively with a group over an extended period of time, is where I was able to practice dancing the score with others also practicing it. Dancing the full UnderScore in such a focused environment has also given me some of my most satisfying contact improvisation dances.

Personal Practice At Jams: Practicing the UnderScore in jams, or at least, practising dancing CI with an awareness of the UnderScore as way to orient myself. What’s often missing, or in terms of the UnderScore incomplete, at jams is what I refer to in my later analysis of the score as “Forming The Container”; some form of opening circle where I get to see and hear from

everyone and some kind of closing circle. I notice for myself that after a circle and some pre-ambulation I find it much easier to open a line of communication and potential connection to everyone present in the space. In the absence of these, then my ability to connect to everyone present, to be available to them and for them to be available to me for dancing is more patchy; it depends a lot on the exact circumstances of course but my point is that its less reliable.

Teaching: This is a funny one. I know I'm not the only one who regards the UnderScore as an important support for teaching but I can't recall actually discussing with anyone exactly how I/we use it, despite this being the route through which Nancy developed it. Very simply, I find it supports my awareness of what's going on. I don't think I ever consciously structured a class around the score but its influence permeates my approach to teaching. Mostly I improvise my classes. I often have a clear idea of what to teach, sometimes an exercise or sometimes a word or phrase, but mostly I'll improvise my way there with the group. In this way, the UnderScore gives me an idea of where we are in relationship to where I'd like to get to, and some ideas of how to get there.

Leading Score Jams: There's a circle at the beginning where I explain some basics like the idea that we're all in all the time, even if we're watching or peeing, and that after a lead warm up. we'll jam for a set time then, take time to reflect before coming together in a circle to share and then end our practice.

Lately, I invite participants to consider their journey from start to finish through the dancing phase as one long continuous solo that may include meetings with others; to consider the whole room as their playground; and to go for whatever personally interests them in the moment. All with respect to other dancers, listening for the effects of one's actions.

I then lead a warm up that goes linearly through the score up to grazing/first engagement), After that I shut up and let the "jam" take its course. About 15 minutes before our agreed ending time, I call the time and suggest we take our time to find an ending together. When we have found a group ending I suggest 10 minutes reflection/warm down alone. Then we meet in a circle to share our impressions and questions before closing our practice.

I've received favourable feedback from people participating in these "score jams". Whether they know about the Underscore or not they often report a deeper more focused and satisfying experience. The only drawback for me is that, when I lead them, having to be responsible for holding the frame, time-wise at the very least, means that there's always a part of me that is not quite free to sink into my own somatic experience.

Part Two: My Relationship To The UnderScore – Linearity Vs. Non-Linearity

When I teach the UnderScore or lead a score jam, I usually insist on a linear progression through the early phases, what I call in my analysis below "Relation To Self". I find it works great for a group with little or no experience of the UnderScore. Its strength is precisely that it encourages us to work alone until we've fully mobilized ourselves, gathering up as much of

ourselves as we can muster at that moment, before we meet in dancing, and that we often find satisfying dances through that process.

I find that for people without a solid skill base, particularly the more dynamic skills including "flying", then making contact before being fully mobilised can lead to getting stuck in low-level, low-energy dancing. Insisting on establishing a solo travelling and expanding kinesphere and warming up the pathways in and out of the floor before making contact with another brings people to a state where exploration (and therefore learning through dancing) of higher levels and more dynamic movement is more likely to occur.

But what I know for myself is that this linear progression doesn't work as a container for all my desires, nor does it necessarily accurately describe what's happening in even a linear UnderScore situation. Life's just not linear! That said, this solo progression to full mobilization is still a valid choice sometimes, "choice" for me being most important word.

When I studied with Nancy in a workshop situation in Arlequi (2001), something big shifted for me in the way I used the score. That's when I began to let go of the linearity and see the score as more of an internal reference to support my awareness of what I am doing in dancing contact, and as an external language which to put those experiences into words which I can share with others.

Since then, that's what the UnderScore has become for me in my personal practice of it at jams, in teaching classes and at the increasing number of opportunities to practice the UnderScore with others; a support for my awareness in a group process. I guess this betrays my Feldenkrais background. "When you know what you are doing, you can do what you want". The Feldenkrais Method in a nutshell.

Annotating The UnderScore – Part One - Unpacking

What I have noticed is that not all of the phases/foci/activities, the things that Nancy gives symbols to, are of the same order: hence my difficulty in referring to them by a single term. Some are definitely physical activities, things that one can choose to do; some are group activities, one needs the agreement of a group to do them. And some are not physical activities so much as perceptual ones, possibilities for focusing one's attention in a particular way.

In my formulation, I see the stages between what I annotate as "A Beginning - Forming the Container" and "An Ending - Closing the Practice" as somehow bracketing what happens in between. And in my reading, what is in between can occur in parallel; simultaneous, overlapping, hybridizing. Hopefully what I mean by this will get clearer later on.

For me, this way of thinking of the score is as a support for awareness for events which can happen anytime. Rather than a sequence to be worked through, I see it more as a menu of possibilities that one can become aware of and share with others in the language of the UnderScore. Thinking this way allows me to apply it more easily to any of the four situations detailed above in which I commonly use it.

What follows is my personal annotation of the UnderScore - this is NOT THE UnderScore. It is not written as it is classically formulated, there are no symbols (in compliance with Nancy's wish that it be written in the sand), and there are numerous small additions and modifications.

The additional subheadings are my own while additional phases/stages/foci are rooted in what I have heard Nancy refer to in her teaching but not referenced in her UnderScore. I should also qualify this by saying that her UnderScore is fluid and not fixed therefore things may have changed since I last met her latest version of it (the last version I saw was in Spring 2006) and indeed what follows is tentative and open to modification – I think what might be of most interest is how I am thinking of it rather than my formulation itself – so:

- **A Beginning - Forming the Container (group practice)**

arriving into the space - seeing who's there

beginning warm-up/tune-up process (solo)

circle

preambulation - sending out lines of connection to others

- **Relation To Self – Mobilisation/Presence (Solo Practice)**

arriving energetically

arriving physically

skinsphere

bonding with the earth

agitation of the mobilizing mass

kinosphere

low kinosphere

high kinosphere

expanding/travelling kinosphere

popping the top of the bubble

overlapping kinosphere

- **Opening To Connections (Solo And/Or Group Practice)**

- **Relation To Others (Group Practice)**

grazing

engagement

development

resolution

disengagement

recirculating through the score

open score (contact duets, trios, quartets and more ... leading to group formations, dancing with energetic connections, observing and re-entering)

- **Floating Foci (Solo Practice)**

telescoping awareness

gap

streaming

sending out lines (for me this seems like an anytime, all the time possibility)

- **An Ending - Closing The Practice (Group Practice)**

resolution of the room

disengagement from the final pattern

reflection – harvest (solo)

thanksgiving - sharing

- **Aftermath - Composting (Solo/Group)**

letting the experience sink in

something returns at odd moments

Annotating The UnderScore – Part Two - Repackaging

Writing out the score, even in this annotated fashion, still doesn't convey my experience of it. For me it is just a step towards what I think is a more interesting and useful way of representing it on paper as a reference for myself. What sticks out to me from the annotations that I've made above is how some aspects of the score seems to refer to the group activity act of forming a container, some aspects refer to solo activities/foci/practices and some refer to group activities/foci/practices.

I go one step further by reassembling all the phases in the matrix form which you see below (figure 1). What is interesting for me is to read the horizontal axis as time passing and the vertical axis as a flow from solo to group activities. I can imagine ways to refine this representation of the score but for now this simple form works for me. And before you get to it, here's a reminder that when I read it, I see it as a menu of possibilities, to do and/or be aware of, and not as a list of tasks to be performed.

Notes On My Redrawing Of The UnderScore

Re-framing the score in this way clarifies for me how I apply it in different situations. Whatever we do (dancing the score as a group, going to a jam, teaching a class) has a beginning and an end. Sometimes this can seem arbitrary but often it is not. For me this beginning and ending marks time, marks out time. In an Underscore practice all the beginning and ending phases are present, in a jam maybe not, in a class situation maybe some are. Sometimes they are explicit and sometimes they are not.

As for what happens over time, the diagram allows me to see what I am experiencing in terms of layers: there is the layer of my relationship to myself and the layer of my relationship to others; and like glue holding them together are the layers of the floating foci and the connections which for me are more ways of considering where my focus of attention can be at any time.



Figure 1 : Redrawing Of The UnderScore

I'm still unsure whether the floating foci and the connections should be separate since noticing connections seems to me to be a subset of telescoping awareness – I decided to draw them separately for now.

Finally, one way I read these layers is in terms of proportion, how much I am in one activity compared to the others at any moment. This leads to the possibility of describing in the language of the Underscore activities that I may be engaged in during Open Score or that a simple linear reading/practice of the Underscore can exclude from the journey towards establishing the Open Score.

I call these hybrid phases/states/foci. It might go something like this:

... I'm warming up, I'm maybe 80% focused on my solo activity (maybe skinsphere) 5% aware of the group activity and 15% telescoping my awareness out to be aware of connections

...I'm rolling, I'm aware of others rolling too, I open my eyes and in my field of vision I see someone with green pants and someone else with a green shirt

... I roll up against someone, I'm now 70% in my solo activity and 30% grazing (a touch event) and I'm focused completely on the activity of the interaction rather than noticing connections – I roll away, alone again ...

... I'm building up my low kinsphere, travelling 50% in solo activity – my eyes are open and I'm noticing the group, I'm grazing touches, 30% in group activity – noticing connections as I go, 20% in connections

... later on, I'm in an engagement, sometimes I inhabit the whole of my kinsphere, there's lots of activity, then, still engaged it slows to a dance of skinspheres - duets can be read in

terms of the quality of kinosphere that they inhabit, and maybe one is in one quality while the other is another. You get the idea hopefully

One final note is that for me, as stated before, one great value of the score is that it provides a language that I share with others to talk about the experience of being in an UnderScore practice, a jam, or a class situation.

Reframing the score like this seems to open the possibilities of using that language to communicate more complex events than a linear notation or practice of the score allows – something I've noticed in practicing the score is people sometimes struggling to fit their experience into it rather than seeing it as a support for the experience that they've just had.

Summing Up

My intention with this article is simply to articulate some of my thinking around the UnderScore and in doing so to contribute something to the growing community that uses it. If it's useful to you then feel free to use some of the ideas alongside what you know already. What I write is intended to supplement not supplant: it's just one person's way to represent what you already know, which is Nancy's work of the UnderScore. I welcome any feed back.