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## ORIGINAL

### CONTACT IMPROVISATION IN SPAIN: THE BEGINNING (1980-1990)

### LOS COMIENZOS DE LA DANZA CONTACT IMPROVISATION EN ESPAÑA (1980-1990)

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#### ABSTRACT

Contact Improvisation is a postmodern dance with origins in the United States (1972) that has evolved slowly and relatively anonymously in Spain. The objective of this work is to reveal how, where and when Contact Improvisation began in Spanish context. The research method combines interpretation of written sources, mainly from the journal Contact Quarterly, as well as correspondence and interviews with the figures involved in the processes analysed. Bañolas, Barcelona and Mallorca were pioneering centres during the 1980s. These cities encompassed a geographic nucleus where the simultaneous arrival of independent initiatives of great importance supported by the creation of contemporary dance studios can be seen. In addition, migrating processes between these spaces and externals were decisive in Contact's development.

**KEY WORDS:** contact improvisation, dance, Spain, history

## RESUMEN

El Contact Improvisation es una danza posmoderna de origen estadounidense (1972) con una evolución lenta y desconocida en España. El objetivo de este trabajo es esclarecer dónde, cuándo y cómo se inicia en el contexto español. En el método de investigación se combinan la interpretación de fuentes escritas, principalmente de la revista *Contact Quarterly*, y el uso de correspondencia y entrevistas con los protagonistas del proceso analizado. Bañolas, Barcelona y Mallorca fueron los focos pioneros en los años ochenta. Se delimitó un núcleo geográfico donde surgieron simultáneamente iniciativas independientes pero de gran repercusión, reforzadas en su mayoría por la creación de espacios de danza contemporánea. Determinantes en el desarrollo fueron, asimismo, las conexiones entre estos espacios y otros externos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** contact improvisation, danza, España, historia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Of the many forms of contemporary dance, we are most concerned with Contact Improvisation for its multidisciplinary and open character in praxis as well as in its theoretical development. Pedagogical approaches regarding bodily consciousness, physical and acrobatic interaction and movement improvisation converge within this corporeal and artistic technique in questioning of socio-educational and aesthetic presuppositions concerning the body and dance. The very definition of the technique is debated in terms of its applications to choreographic composition and the socio-educational uses that have arisen through its history.

Among the few studies that have addressed CI from a historical point of view we note Novack's thesis (1990). This study submits the culture of the United States, wherein the dance form emerged, to an anthropological analysis. Novack addresses the complexity of the concept of CI and deepens the analysis of its initial evolution. Other historical reflections can be found in the journal *Contact Quarterly*, a fundamental document for monitoring the origins of CI. In *Contact Quarterly* we highlight articles by the editors, Nelson and Stark Smith (1997) as well as the publication of the conference on the history of CI held at the Freiburg CI Festival in August 2005 (Stark Smith, 2006). In this case, testimonial perspectives emphasizing the value of historical subjectivity are considered.

In Spanish, the first publication that we find about CI is the translation of an article from the French magazine *EPS* of the same year (Sionnet and Thirion, 1987a; Sionnet and Thirion, 1987b). In it the term "danse de contact" which was translated into Spanish as "danza de contacto" is proposed. While this term is still used in both languages, we don't consider it appropriate because it does not allude to improvisation. Another important contribution to studies of CI was

the special issue of the Belgian magazine *Nouvelles de danse* by Kuypers (1999), from which Brozas (2000) proposed a first approach to the concept of CI. Also, as a landmark publication in Spanish, we note of Rizzo (1998) on CI in Argentina. Currently there are several authors who study CI in Spain, but, so far, the pedagogical approach has prevailed over the historical approach. See for example Torrents and Castañer (2008) and Zurdo (2008).

In our research, we attempt to analyse the development of this technique within the framework of the evolution of contemporary dance. In this study we ask how, when and under what circumstances Contact Improvisation began to be practiced in Spain. These questions are set forward into the complex and shifting terrain of an analysis which combines ontological elements such as the definition of Contact Improvisation, geographical elements including the boundaries and relationships between locations in and regions of Spain and between these and other more distant places, and finally socio-historical elements, for example, the evolution of agents implicated as individuals: dancers, teachers, choreographers, and organizers; or as collectives or entities (institutions, schools, associations, and dance studios.)

## **2. RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1. METHOD**

In this work, content analysis and direct communication with involved in the object of study are combined. Among the documents used as sources for this study, we highlight the Newsletters from the journal *Contact Quarterly* reviewed in the Documentation Centre of the CND (*Centre Nacional de la Danse*) in Pantin (France) in July of 2010. This section of the journal allows an analysis of the evolution of participation, in the Spanish context, thanks to short articles by internal agents, whose activity developed in Spain, and by external agents located in other countries. Within these short articles, one finds news of courses, workshops, meetings, classes and other Contact Improvisation events. In addition, the names of subscribers and distributors of the journal and their places of origin including mailing and physical addresses can be found. Hence, not only does the journal provide important information, but it also facilitates direct contact with those implicated in the processes under study.

Electronic communication has also proved to be a fundamental resource not only for the collection of information and content from messages but, in addition, as a means of establishing contact and of coordinating in-person and telephone interviews.

A series of unstructured interviews, as characterized by Ruiz Olabuénaga (2007, 170), were carried out between 2009 and 2011. The flexibility of this kind of interview is evident in the development of the interview itself over the course of the period of investigation. Written questions are adapted to each interviewee according to his or her role and to the data offered. Moreover, the interviewer is

permitted to interject new questions or to modify the written questions over the course of the interview.

Biographical files were established along side the interviews using information gathered from a variety of publications including personal and professional blogs and/or web pages (of creative or academic studios), journals, books edited or published by our subjects as well as flyers or pamphlets advertising the courses they offered.

During the first phase, between 2009 and 2010, important information about the existence of new figures to be incorporated into the still unfinished network was collected via written and oral interviews thanks to email and conversations that took place at Contact Improvisation events including workshops, jams, festivals and encounters.

Since the end of 2010, during the second phase of network construction, almost no data concerning new protagonists was added. However, important information about the movements, actions and thoughts of those already known, as well as their connections with one another, was collected.

## **2.2. GEOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Modern dance emerged in the early twentieth century as a reaction and alternative to classical dance. Modern dance developed from initiatives in both Europe and America that manifested throughout the century (Michel and Ginot, 1998) albeit at an uneven pace depending on contexts and countries. In Spain, activity related to modern dance in the early and mid twentieth century was quite marginal and has hardly been studied (Olabarría, 2010). The beginnings of modern dance in Spain are usually located in the early seventies, when several schools and groups were founded in various parts of the country: Carmen Senra's studio in Madrid, the group training of Anna Maleras in Barcelona, and in San Sebastián the dance company "Annexa" directed by Joseph and Conxa Lainez (Martínez and Menéndez, 1999; Calvo and León, 2011, p 28).

The opening up to new forms of artistic expression that marked the change of political regime in the late seventies can be considered a favorable factor to the establishment of these initiatives, as well as to the introduction of new ones. This is the case for post-modern dance proposals like the CI which emerged in New York in 1972 and spread internationally thanks to the creation in 1975 of the journal *Contact Quarterly* and thanks to the workshops and presentations made in some parts of Europe (Nelson and Stark Smith, 1997). CI actually reached Spain in the early eighties, but found an unfavorable socio-cultural and aesthetic context for the overlap of postmodern techniques on modern techniques which had not yet been sufficiently assimilated.

The history of contemporary dance in Spain including modern and postmodern dance began only shortly before the introduction of Contact Improvisation, perhaps a decade, if we consider the end of the dictatorship the trigger that initiated an opening up to new forms of expression that had been waiting for its moment. 1975 is the year that began the transition in Spain. This event allowed communication with artistic innovation from the exterior, and during this same year *Contact Quarterly, a vehicle for moving ideas* was established and acted as an instrument for the circulation of experiences within new dance, improvisation, and Contact Improvisation. We believe that it is this historical fact which caused the slow incorporation and assimilation of the proposals of postmodern dance. We find a similar story regarding the history of dance in the countries of Eastern Europe as discussed by Ana Vujanovic (2010, 135) for whom “Contemporary dance appeared in the societies of the east 'as one might expect,' in parallel with their transition to democracy and capitalism during the decades of the 1990s and 2000s”. For Vujanovic the “delayed awakening” corresponded with a “consistently late adoption” with respect to many contexts in the geographical east.

In the 1980s and 1990s Spain saw an evolution which in other contexts such as North America or Europe – Germany, France, The United Kingdom – was realized over the course of nearly a century. Postmodern dance arose in the 1960s in North America while in Spain Modern dance of American influence or German Expressionism, to mention the two most influential currents in the rest of Europe, had not even begun its development.

In this regard, Sánchez (2005) indicates the eighties as the time of birth of contemporary dance in Spain. The eighties were moment that manifested the need to advance, in a short time, through processes that took decades in other cultures. In the 1980s and 1990s Spain saw an evolution which, in other contexts, such as North America or Europe – Germany, France, The United Kingdom – was realized over the course of nearly a century. Postmodern dance arose in the 1960s in North America (Banes, 2002) while in Spain Modern dance of American influence or German Expressionism, to mention the two most influential currents in the rest of Europe, had not even begun its development (Martínez & Menéndez, 1999; Brozas, 2001; Giménez, 2001; Calvo y León, 2011).

We find a similar story regarding the history of dance in the countries of Eastern Europe as discussed by Ana Vujanovic (2010, 135) for whom “Contemporary dance appeared in the societies of the east, as one might expect,' in parallel with their transition to democracy and capitalism during the decades of the 1990s and 2000s”. For Vujanovic the “delayed awakening” corresponded with a “consistently late adoption” with respect to many contexts in the geographical western.

Viewed broadly Contact Improvisation can count almost 30 years of existence in Spain. From the beginning of the 1980s to today, we can identify four periods of development, two in each of the greater stages that make up the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>

centuries. This study sets off from the first period of the first stage. During this time events are confined to a catalonian and balearic nucleus with a few isolated and almost inconsequential events in other regions. During the second period, activity began to grow, although slowly, in a few other geographic centres including Madrid, the Basque Country, and Andalusia (Granada). It was after 2000 that a decentralized expansion was seen in regions including Castilla y León, Extremadura, Murcia, the Valencian Community and La Rioja. This expansion coincided with the arrival of teachers and dancers from Brazil and Argentina. 2010 saw the first *Meeting of Spanish Teachers and Organizers of Contact Improvisation* (EMOCIE). In 2011, the *European Contact Improvisation Teachers Exchange* (ECITE) was held for the first time in Spain (Ibiza). These events marked a milestone in the formation of a new period. See Figure 1.

<p><b>XX Century</b></p> <p><b>1980-1990</b> Banyoles, Barcelona y Mallorca.</p> <p>1990-2000 Catalonia, Madrid, Basque Country y Andalusia.</p> <p><b>XXI Century</b></p> <p>2000-2010 Decentralized social practice and connection with new countries.</p> <p>2010/2011... EMOCIE/ECITE internal and external communication and coordination.</p>
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**Figure 1.** Stages and locations in the development of Contact Improvisation in Spain.

### **2.3. CONTACT IMPROVISATION AND DANCE SPACES**

It is largely migration that has permitted exchanges and knowledge growth thanks to the possibility of sharing diverse experiences. It is possible to establish the names and last names of those responsible for the development of Contact Improvisation in the context of this study. However, it is not the actions of individuals, although many operated individually at first, but the interplay between them that created an assemblage of actions and situations with a more collective result.

Both immigration and emigration were responsible for the introduction of Contact Improvisation. Many dancers emigrated for longer or shorter periods to train themselves, and many teachers dancers and choreographers arrived, invited by organizers, and often aided by dance studios. By hosting, more or less continuously, the processes of education and experimentation dance studios are able to take part as protagonists in the development of the techniques that they teach. The flexible environment under which dance in general and Contact Improvisation in particular are managed in these studios determines the evolutionary process. That is to say, management affects the direction, application, and degree of expansion and visibility that the technique in question sees.

Of the studios registered for Contact Improvisation in particular between 1980 and 1990, as represented in figure 2, one at first sees the persistence of a few of them up until the present day. Others disappeared early on, but none of these latter were particularly important in the pioneering of Contact Improvisation. Concerning the definition of these schools, most are centres dedicated to contemporary dance with the exception of *El Timbal* where dance does not play a central role. All of these demonstrated a particular openness in their relationship to dance where it concerns other arts in addition to trends or physical techniques connected to dance. In this sense *Arlequi* is notable for its emphasis on corporeal postmodern work and for its rural, seasonal and international character. Vendrell (2008, 231) cites the *Mercat de les Flors* for its activity after 1985 concerning innovations in postmodern dance, including Contact Improvisation. However we have not found data corresponding to specific activities during this decade.

**La Fàbrica** *Espai de dansa*: isolate intensive workshop in 1981.  
(’81-’90)  
**Arlequi** *Danza, teatro y artes corporales*: Intensive workshops since 1984. (uninterrupted)  
(’81 - ...)  
**Àrea** *Dansa y creació*: classes, intensive workshops and jams in alternating periods since its foundation.  
(’86 - ...)  
**Bugé** *Centre d’activitats de dansa*: Classes and intensive courses in 1986 and 1987.  
(’84 - ...)  
**El Timbal** *Formación y creación escénica*: Regular classes in 1988 and 1989.  
(’69 - ...)

**Figure 2.** Contact Improvisation: Studios and Activities between 1980 and 1990

*La Fàbrica* was conceived as a teaching space and as a platform for the performance of contemporary dance and was a pioneer of this format in Barcelona and all of Catalonia. Opened by Norma Axenfeld and Toni Gelabert its operation spanned the decade of the eighties from its first course in 1980/1981 until 1990. During an interview with Toni Gelabert (October 26, 2010) confirmed that in 1981 a Contact Improvisation workshop was offered by an American teacher whom she had met during a stay in New York in 1979. At that time she also had the opportunity to see Steve Paxton and other “excellent dancers” of Contact Improvisation who, like him, had been trained in other techniques such as the Cunningham technique which, according to Gelabert, formed the base and quality of their movements. Contact Improvisation did not hold any special interest with her. It was only an occasional workshop. However it did draw a masculine audience that was perhaps attracted by the openness and physically acrobatic nature which, through training in Contact Improvisation, they could pass on to other forms of dance. *La Fàbrica* cannot be considered one of the fundamental enclaves in the development of Contact Improvisation, but one must recognize its contribution in the field of contemporary dance, and one must value its consequent contribution, however incidental, to the

introduction into Spain of Contact Improvisation as one more among the many approaches to movement that make up dance.

Initiated by Àngels Margarit and Elisa Huertas among others, *Bugé* started as a dancers' cooperative in 1984. By 1986 it was possible for María Antonia Oliver and María Muñoz to organize a few Contact Improvisation courses (Gray, 1986, p54). In the autumn of 1987 classes and courses were taking place at *Bugé* continuously. In large part, these courses were offered by teachers living in Mallorca, namely Julien Meunier and Susan Gray. Additionally, some courses were offered by visiting teachers such as Susanne Cotto from *L'Atelier* in Paris (Gray & Meunier, 1987).

*L'Atelier* led by, among others, Susanne Cotto, Marc Tompkins and Didier Silhou, has been a focal point of activity in Paris since 1980. After several years of *Contact* experience at *L'Atelier*, Julien Meunier and Susan Gray began to offer Contact Improvisation activities focusing on training and on experimentation (Gray & Meunier, 1986a; 1986b). Conscious of their geographic isolation in Mallorca, they attempted to project their activity not only to Catalonia but to other regions of Spain as well including Galicia where, in 1988, they offered intensive courses in Santiago de Compostela, Vigo and La Coruña (Gray & Meunier, 1988, p.53). Susan Gray took it upon herself to publicize and register events through *Contact Quarterly* confirming the international character of her work. In 1985 they participated in the first *European Contact Improvisation Teachers Exchange* which was held in Amsterdam. They organized intensive courses such as *Contact and Graphism* during the summer of 1986 and 1987. In addition, during 1987, they organized jams and international meetings. Susan Gray's last addition to *Contact Quarterly*, where she expressed her interest in forming her own studio to facilitate the organization of courses, appeared in 1990 (Gray & Meunier, 1990, p.50).

In parallel, encouraged by her exposure to American postmodern dance in New York beginning in 1981, Sonia Klamburg's efforts and her interest in bringing a totally unknown practice to Barcelona was not realized until she found an opening in the creation and dance studio known as *Área*. Inaugurated in 1986 and still active, *Área* is an emblematic centre for the development of contemporary dance in general and Contact Improvisation in particular. Founded with the idea of offering professional training in contemporary dance, *Área* had been recognized from its beginning for its openness to techniques and art forms unrelated to dance even including circus. During certain periods regular classes and jams were organized. Both dancers and acrobats attended. In 1987 these sessions were perhaps the first of their kind in Barcelona. After a period of inactivity jams were taken up again, encouraged by new teachers. The first intensive course was offered by Danny Trenner in 1986 and, though not with complete regularity, Contact Improvisation workshops continue to be organized along with training in other postmodern dance techniques. The quality of instruction was such that during the first years students were attracted from abroad and with increasing frequency from other regions of Spain (Trenner



1987). “Most of the people who began to take courses and practice Contact at *Área* came from France, Holland, Germany ... When they departed I was left alone... but life goes in big spirals... and after many years Contact flourished again. At *Área*, during certain periods, we have started hosting regular jams again. This year we had several encounters but organized more punctually” (S. Klamburg, personal communication, Jun 21, 2010).

For its part *Arlequi*, a centre for dance, theatre and arts played a fundamental role in the presence of Contact Improvisation in Spain. Operations began in 1981 managed from Germany by Anna Borredà. Activities at this rural location have mainly been intensive summer courses offered principally in Banyoles. Other activities taking place in Gottingen and Berlin grant the centre a marked international character. The focus has always been on improvisation. From among the various forms of dance Contact Improvisation has enjoyed a particular importance and continuity since the beginning. During the period in question, specifically from 1984 to 1991, courses by Bob Rease were held without interruption (A. Borredà, personal communication February 8, 2010; Rease, 1986; 1988). Being one of the principle drivers and educators of this technique Nancy Stark Smith's consistent presence after 1987 is also notable (Stark Smith, 1987, p.58; Koteen & Stark Smith, 2008, p.68; N. Stark Smith, personal communication February 5, 2010; A. Borredà, personal communication February 8, 2010). In general and to a greater degree than in *Área*, this centre saw more international recognition and attracted, in its first years, many students from Germany and other European countries while the participation of Catalanian dancers and dancers from other regions of Spain increased gradually.

Finally, acting as a bridge between centres, Yolanda Alonso (Alonso; Hoel & Llinares, 1988, p.48) marks a period of intense activity during 1987 when together with Esmeralda Llinares and Marta Hoel, she began to practice Contact Improvisation thanks to the teachers Danny Trenner (*Área*), Julien Meunier and Susan Gray (*Bugé*), and Nancy Stark Smith (*Arlequi*). Later during the years 1988 and 1989, Yolanda Alonso offered Contact Improvisation classes in *El Timbal*, which stood “like an island during a period of reduced activity in other locations” (Y. Alonso, personal communication September 1, 2011). Yolanda Alonso indicates a dead point at the end of the first stage of our study which she attributes to the creation of dance companies at the end of the eighties and which coincides with a period of emigration for some of the protagonists (Brozas, García & López, 2011, p.18).

#### 2.4. TRANSITIONS AND EXTERNAL REFERENCES

It is necessary to highlight the external forces that influenced the growth experienced by these dance spaces during the first decade. Contact Improvisation was born in 1972 at *Oberlin College* and the *Weber Gallery* in New York out of the collaboration between Steve Paxton and other dancers and choreographers interested in exploring the effects and possibilities of games and interactions using the body's weight. From New York it extended rapidly

across the United States and shortly after across Europe. Steve Paxton brought his first performance to *L'Attico Gallery* in Rome in 1973 (Nelson & Stark Smith, 1997, p.2). According to the collection of *newsletters* from the journal *Contact Quarterly*, the first enclaves of development in Europe were *Dartington College* in the United Kingdom, *L'Atelier* in Paris, various locations in Italy, and since 1980 London, Amsterdam, and Berlin as well.

New York was also an attractive place to the first generations of exiled dancers. In 1979 Toni Gelabert discovered Steve Paxton's dance by chance. And, for example, Sonia Klamburg studied Contact Improvisation with Robin Feld, Andrew Harwood and Daniel Trenner at *Performance Space 122*. Other locations in the United States such as Department of Dance at UCLA in Los Angeles or Pineapple's STEPS were also initial references (S. Klamburg, personal communication, August 31, 2011).

In Europe, together with *Dartington College* in the United Kingdom and *L'Atelier* in Paris, the city of Amsterdam soon distinguished itself. In particular the spaces *Melkweg* and the *Opleiding Moderne Dans*, after *SNDO*, *School for New Dance Development* at the Amsterdam School of the Arts where more than a few Spanish dancers were trained. Larger numbers have been trained there since the 1990s. Between 1982 and 1983, María Muñoz formed part of the Dutch company *Shusaku & Dormu Dance Theater*. Through Julyen Hamilton's instruction in Amsterdam, she was able to bring Contact Improvisation, among other artistic tools, to *La Dux* a company founded together with María Antonia Oliver in Barcelona in 1985 (Sánchez, 2006, p.263). The two of them offered a course in Contact Improvisation at *Sala Olimpia* in Madrid organized by the Centro Dramático Nacional in 1988. Thus they transmitted their interest in the technique to Agustín Bellusci and Ana Buitrago who were degreed at *SNDO* in 1992 (A. Bellusci, personal communication April 14, 2011; A. Buitrago, personal communication, May 3, 2011; M.A. Oliver, personal communication, February 4, 2011). During the 1990s, Bellusci and Buitrago participated in the development of Contact Improvisation in Madrid mainly via classes and courses offered at *Estudio3* school of performing arts.

During the decade of the 1980s *SNDO* was as much a school as a performance center [...] The *Goldberg Variations* by Steve Paxton, for example, were performed and recorded in 1986 at the school on *Da Costakade* long before it was promoted by European producers. Through summer courses, performances, conferences, lunch performances and jams the *Da Costakade* school was the centre that introduced to Holland and the European dance community dance improvisation, Contact Improvisation and the techniques of alignment and release in the 1980s (Fabius, 2010, p.192). [...]

*SNDO* is still today considered the principal centre for the practice and maintenance of improvisation, and Contact Improvisation in the world of dance in Holland (Fabius, 2010, p.199).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Following the decade under study chronologically, the fortunate inaugural workshop in 1981 at *La Fábrica* appears significant to the beginning of Contact Improvisation in Spain. But in the question of the fundamental nucleus of development, one must consider the initiatives of Ana Borredà at *Arlequi* (Banyoles) and of Sonia Klamburg at *Área* (Barcelona) as well as the collective efforts of María Muñoz and María Antonia Oliver from *Bugé* (Barcelona) together with Julien Meunier y Susan Gray (Mallorca). It was the latter two who realized the first steps in the national expansion as well as in international communication through the journal *Contact Quarterly*. For her part, by 1987, Yolanda Alonso had brought together all the active centres in Barcelona. This was a special time and place for Contact Improvisation in Spain.

The study gives evidence that the origins of Contact Improvisation in Spain are not one single root or trunk but sprang rather from numerous seeds scattered and taking root simultaneously in a small geographic area bounded by Banyoles, Barcelona and Mallorca. In spite of being able to be defined as a privileged region for its artistic activity and openness, we believe that it was affected by the socio-political conditions that weighed on all of Spain in the 1980s and generated an aesthetic resistance that made the evolution of techniques and uses of dance difficult.

During this period, the dancers implicated in the transmission of Contact Improvisation were characterized by a high degree of dedication to the dance. This dedication is confirmed by the trajectory of their artistic and management careers. They formed an elite vanguard that experienced the urgency for communication with the postmodern developments that were occurring beyond their borders. From this point of view Contact Improvisation can be understood as a privileged tool in the formation and creation of contemporary dance of the time. It is a tool that expands thanks to the training exchanges between active centres in New York, Great Britain, France, Holland and Germany. For its part the creation and organization of dance spaces facilitates the development of activities such as courses, regular classes and jams. Training centres for performing arts are also receptive to this technique, and always foster the meeting of dance with other arts. It was a collection of rural and urban dance studios with regular and irregular training plans, annual or seasonal and almost always private that constituted the network of support for expansion.

The first community of Contact Improvisation in Spain can be understood as the small catalonian-balearic centre where independent initiatives arose simultaneously, almost unknown to one another, but that grew with the same strong impulse to promote subsequent development in other regions.

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