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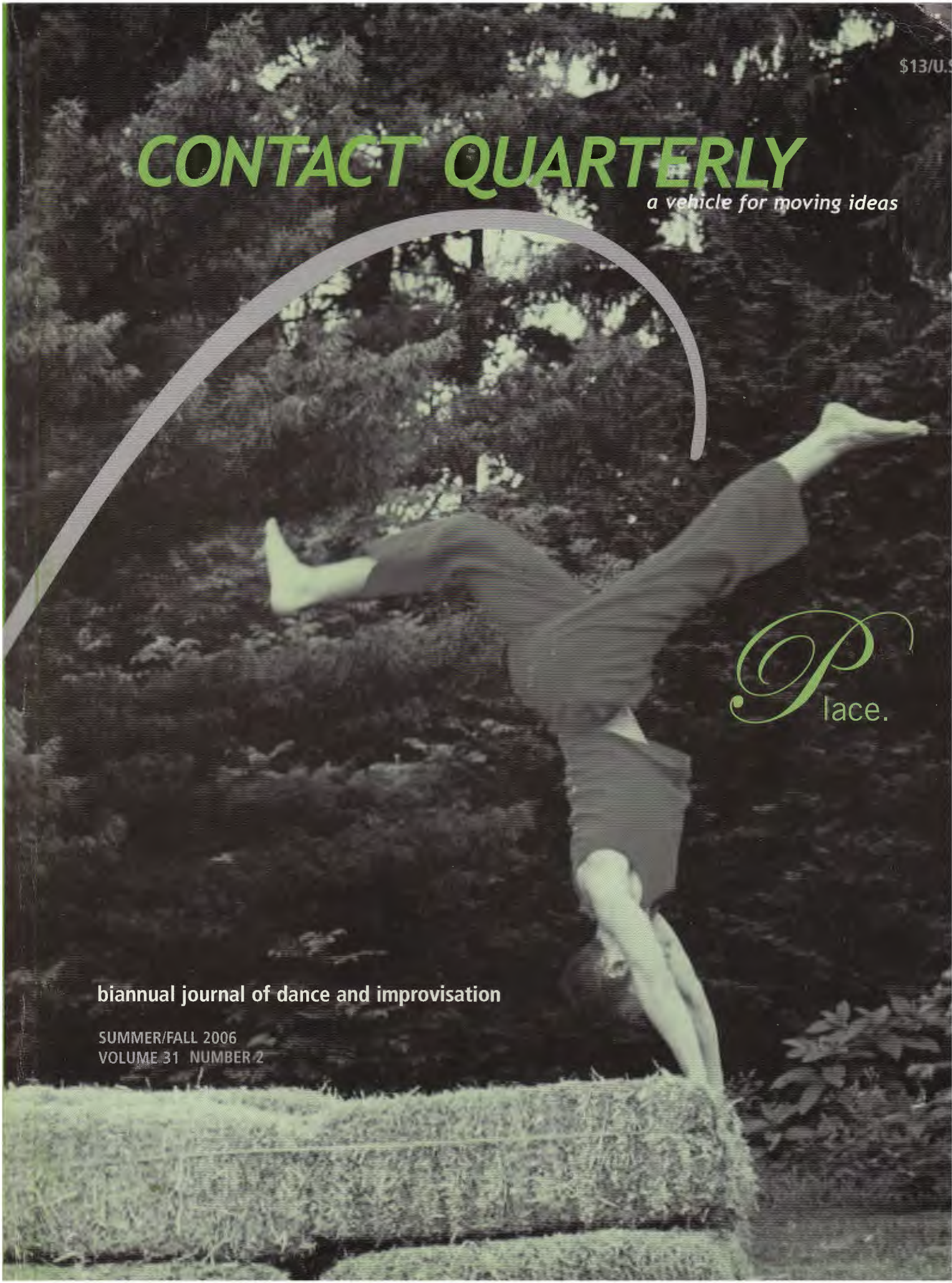
# CONTACT QUARTERLY

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## NIGHTMARE AND ROMANCE: Partnering Place

Interview with  
**Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig**

by Heidi Henderson for *CQ* Place issue

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*Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig, co-artistic directors of their New York City-based PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER, have gained an international following for dance theater work that transforms the familiar into the mysterious, the subversive, and the intimate. They have been touring extensively throughout the U.S., Europe, Latin America, Asia, and New Zealand since 1987. In addition to their concert stage work, they have become well known for their site works and community performance residencies combining dance, music, text, and video.*

*Whether in rowboats in NYC's Central Park, the fern forests of New Zealand, or the Eiun-In Buddhist temple in Kyoto, their intention is to partner a site in such a way that habitual assumptions of what art is, where art happens, and who participates are broken open, taking both audience and participants into a heightened state of awareness.*

*[above]* Sara Pearson and Patrik Widrig in *Ordinary Festivals*, 1997, Joyce Theater, New York City.

*I spoke to Sara and Patrik in their East Village apartment filled with bright reds and yellows, including beautiful small boxes of old Chinese firecrackers shaped like chickens, lined up in a neat row (I knocked some over). I wish I could adequately describe their gestures; as they talk about the dances, they dance them with their hands. I wish I could describe the beautiful unspoken communication between the two. They finish each other's sentences and ask each other for details. In speaking with them for this interview, I could feel the way they work together in space—the give and take of their ideas and their true willingness to work collaboratively. [H.H.]*

**Heidi: When and why did you first choose to present or make work in nontraditional spaces?**

**Sara:** I feel like every seven years or so I start a whole new kind of life; the old skin peels off and the way I want to dance, what I am interested in, everything seems to change. And that happened when Patrik and I started working together as artistic partners and being together as life partners. I was thirty-six with nowhere to live and almost no money. I was also breaking away from my artistic home with Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis, where I had been teaching and receiving free rehearsal space for over ten years. I was starting from scratch.

**Patrik:** I was just finishing my studies.

**Sara:** And we saw this little tiny ad in the *Village Voice*: “Call for applications: site-specific dance projects for Coney Island Festival.” Elise Bernhardt had recently started *Dancing in the Streets*. So we wrote our first grant and we got it. Neither of us had ever worked out of the studio before. I grew up being interested in pure abstract movement and choreography. All I needed was to be alone in the studio and I was happy; it didn't matter where in the world. I remember we first started with the idea of taking a piece we already



photo © James Murphy

knew and putting it on the sand. That totally changed the first time we got out on the sand.

**Patrik:** We chose to create our dance on the beach right by the ocean, partnering the sand, the rocks, the water.

**Heidi: Did you dance by yourselves?**

**Sara:** No, we had a whole group, and it was the first time we were able to pay the dancers—two subway tokens a rehearsal, and that was a stretch.

**Patrik:** The opening image came from a Dutch dancer. The whole cast of sixteen is kneeling in a line in the sand.

**Sara:** The Brooklyn Conch Orchestra, which we hadn't heard until the day of the show, begins to play, and each person digs a hole in the sand in front of them, dig dig dig dig dig. And then everybody puts their head in the hole and covers it up. It was weird and beautiful and funny and mysterious. If we had been really radical, we would have had that be the entire piece, but that was just the preamble. And then came

this very wild dance with sliding and tumbling and feeling the sky and the sand. And then in the very end, everyone walking out into the water, just walking walking walking. Stop. End. And then we bowed, and as we rose we just kept going backwards until we all fell into the ocean and disappeared. [*Graven Images*, 1987]

So, that was the beginning of the nightmare and the romance. Everybody has this romantic idea of what to expect from making site-specific work—it's hell, but it's also heaven. Learning to work outside is a whole other thing. Learning to pull the focus in.

**Patrik:** It's too hot or too humid or too cold. There's a drought and the grass that was once so soft dries into needles so sharp the choreography needs to be changed. Then it starts to rain, the clover blooms and the bees come out. People discover they are allergic to hay and flowers, to the sun, to each other. All these things.

**Heidi:** Recognizing that many of these dances are commissions, how do you choose a site?

**Sara:** A site has to speak to us before we can make something. So we really partner with the site. In some of the places, we are trying to just frame the site so people see the site. So that our choreography, and the music, and the costumes we choose, and the objects we choose to work with, frame the site in a particular kind of way that breaks down people's habitual way of looking at nature or looking at a museum. And also breaks down their habitual ways of looking at dance, so that the integration of the two takes people to a whole new place.

One of the things that we love in the process of choreographing in public spaces is that people walk by and they watch you and they don't know what they are seeing and they get drawn into the experience. The idea—which is so prevalent in the United States—that experimental performing arts are obscure, inaccessible, and only for the initiated few is completely untrue. In every project we have done, it has just been so thrilling and surprising and educational and reenergizing to see complete strangers come and watch the work being created. Working in Bryant Park, in New York City, an Iranian security guard came up to us and said: "Excuse me, madame. Is this a Sufi dance I am seeing?" I felt so honored. [*Ordinary Festivals* at Bryant Park, site-adaptation of stage work for three hundred oranges, two knives, set to delightfully strange Italian Folk music, 1996]

The next year, we were choreographing a dance installation along a stream in Central Park in New York City. On

one side, there were these old Asian men fishing for crayfish, and on the other, these young Hispanic kids with their skateboards. Gradually the boys inched closer to us, watching and whispering, acting very cool. Finally one of them declares: "I know what this is. It's a race in slow motion." Or, at Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors, a smart old immigrant Jewish lady sits down next to me and starts giving suggestions: "No. I think you should go back there. What do you mean by this? Is it necessary?"

These interactions are priceless and important. At the core of our mission is a desire to open performance to a greater population with free performances in public spaces. But time is so precious when you are rehearsing site-specific work. Patrik makes these beautifully designed huge posters and hand-out flyers that explain the work. [see *Curious Invasion* map]

**Heidi:** When you arrive at a new site, what do you bring with you that you already know? How do you find a focus? How do you balance using the tools that you have and wanting to allow the piece to evolve naturally, to allow that magic of things appearing?

**Sara:** Let's say Laura Faure, director of the Bates Dance Festival, invites us to make a piece in the Audubon Sanctuary in Falmouth, Maine. [*A Curious Invasion/Giltsland Farm*, 1997] What we try to do is, just the two of us go out there in the morning with no one around and just sit with the space for four hours. Just be quiet and listen. That's the stellar time. We see what speaks to us and then we go home. And then we go back the next day with someone (a dancer) and we get an idea of how we would like to put it together. The Audubon Sanctuary is this huge sprawling place.

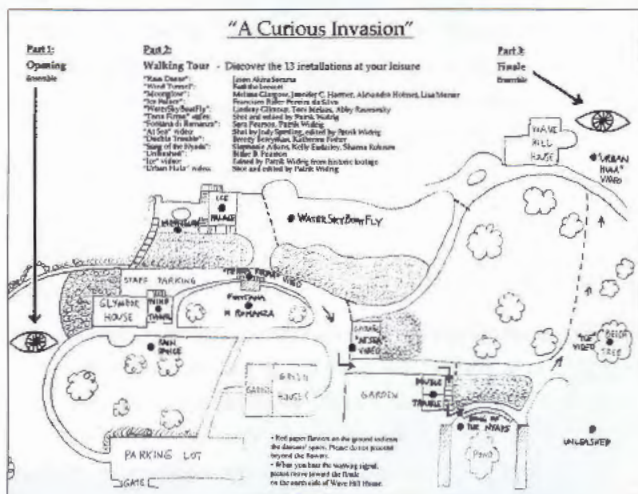
We know there are basic organizations for performance that we might use: Are we drawn to one site? To multiple sites? Do we want to keep the audience together, guiding them through the piece, or let them wander on their own? Before we fall deeper in love, we need to consider how big an audience we are anticipating. Because we've seen incredible sites that could only hold ten people at a time. Or the sites are too difficult to get to.

The site tells us where to go, what to do. We let the piece evolve, not deciding what it is before we get there.

**Patrik:** The thing that's really fun about doing site-specific things is the architectural space and the perspective that you can play with. Far away, close up, with lots of people, different numbers of people, movement too. The space affects the quality of the movement.



photo © James Murphy



[top] Blake Pearson dancing in the "Unleashed" installation of *A Curious Invasion*, Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, 2001.

[bottom] Map created by Patrik Widrig to hand out during the performance of *A Curious Invasion*.

**Sara:** This idea of creating dance on a bare stage, it's sort of like: "Where did that come from?" What an odd thing. In the piece at the Audubon Sanctuary, the audience gets all settled and they know that they're facing a certain direction. And there are these hills, and there are these trees, and they don't know what they are going to see, and they just know that the dance is starting in this direction. But is the dance going to come up three inches from their face? We started with Rodrigo running along the horizon. He's one-inch high, and then all of a sudden people start filling in. They're like ants—you see them and then they disappear, and then they start coming up and all of a sudden, there they are, they've walked up the hill. Then you follow this little path and you don't know where the next dance is going to happen. And "oh my goodness, there's Karinne Keithley on a rock over there." And then you walk down a little ravine and you are following this path and you hear this music and you don't know where it is coming from. And you walk under a tree and the music is above your head. And there is somebody up in the tree. There is a dance up above you. Then you walk around a corner and "my god, there's Lisa Race upside down and so close you can touch her." It was such a thrill. So, that piece had the audience in motion: they would settle for three minutes, then they would walk for a while, and then they would settle. We had chairs set up so that they would know where to settle. They would settle and then there would be this field of prairie grass and you don't know what you are seeing, you don't know where you should be looking, and all of sudden these hands start to come up. You don't see the bodies, just the arms coming up and becoming part of this prairie grass.

**Patrik:** How do you get your ideas? It happens in all different kinds of ways. You bring everything that you've encountered in your life into this situation. Time, really taking the time, seeing and letting ideas sift through you, move through you, then trying things out. Get a couple of bodies and just try something out. And very quickly you realize that it doesn't work at all the way you imagined it.

**Sara:** Often what we end up doing is not at all what we expect we're going to like or do. It's often completely different. There's this initial disappointment, then dread. Then, if the mind can let go, something else opens up, this whole other possibility that's just shocking and thrilling.

**Heidi:** About memory of space or nostalgia for space: Are there places you have danced that live in your memory like a childhood home does? When you go into a space



photo © James Murphy

Lindsay Gilmour (left) and Abby Rasmusky in the "WaterSkyBoatFly" installation of PEARSONWIDRIG'S *A Curious Invasion*, Wave Hill, Bronx, NY, 2001.

**and dance, you must have a strength of memory about that space.**

**Patrik:** My grandmother used to have a summer place in the Swiss Alps where she ran a restaurant. When we visited, we would sleep in the hayloft right under the roof. I remember going to sleep in that hayloft and it started raining. Being so close to the rain...

**Sara:** It is such a different tuning to not have a ceiling over your head. Just warming up for a show outside, just feeling the ground, opening your performing awareness to that. There are no boundaries. It doesn't end. How far out you go and how you focus as a performer and how you help focus the audience is so different. One of my favorite memories of performing was when we took *Ordinary Festivals* and "site-specificized" it out on the quad at Bates and rechoreographed every section spatially. I open that dance with a solo that, in the theater, stays within a small pool of light. It's a memory piece in itself. I toss this orange back and forth and I am remembering. The quad has a row of beautiful elm trees. The audience can't even see me, I am so far away, and I am slowly, slowly walking down this long, long way as I take the orange and pass it back and forth. I am walking past trees and the trees are like year after year, lifetime after lifetime. Then I just arrive. It felt so naked. I am here now.

In Patrik's exquisite solo—a solo that we originally made inside—he dances across on this diagonal sidewalk that is four times, six times, eight times the length of a stage. What that did to the piece, to watch the stretching out of space... My piece was vertical and his was horizontal and that imagery of the upstage/downstage going deep and the horizontal taking such time. What does that mean? The visceral imagery of the feeling of that cutting through me—I feel your dance going through.

**Patrik:** The most successful things that have happened, they do become these places of love. Something happens in

the work that is comforting to the soul. This emotional drop happens from a heightened way of looking at something. It has weight. That feeling of memory and comfort and self and unself as well. It's really large.

**Sara:** This is like a comfort that lets go of the familiar. Finding this deep settledness that is also so enlivening. So that there is this new kind of comfort that takes you into new territory that is both familiar and completely unfamiliar.

**Patrik:** It is also in the kinetic experience of dancing that I feel like I am tapping into a very, very similar place. It is something deep and rich and very specific and yet indescribable. That is a place.



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Introduction includes text from PEARSONWIDRIG DANCETHEATER website.



photo © Eleftheria Deko

Sali Treek in *A Curious Invasion/Livada* in Tinos, Greece, July 1993.