Frictions and Illuminations

By simply moving information and brushing information against information, any medium whatever creates vast wealth.


CCA editors have been talking about the topic of “CI Intersections” for many years, as articles and photos pass by us issue after issue, evidencing an increasing number of CI classes and events in which Contact Improvisation practice is mixed with a variety of other movement forms, subject matters, and intentions.

Regularly, we field questions, concerns, and attempts at clarity. Questions like: What is Contact Improvisation? Are there any limits to what should be called Contact Improvisation? Does it matter? As a CQ editor, I wanted to help establish a platform for the discussion (and documentation) of these intersections—both the frictions and illuminations, and the specific content of the current conversations and hybrids. Thus, this piece in CQ.

There are those CI practitioners who are concerned about the muddying of the “pure physical form” of CI practice by combining CI with additional movement forms and subjects of focus. And there are those who relish and celebrate these developments, harking back to CI’s innovative, experimental roots.

How might “non-traditional” engagements with CI cause us to question fundamental assumptions about the form and open it to new, relevant discourse without losing the fundamental physical practice that has begotten all these explorations?

I wonder about the differences between questioning, hybridizing, integrating, using as a reference or vehicle, appropriating, redefining, and applying Contact Improvisation.

I feel both the promise of the free experimentation with the form and the discomfort of the potential loss of what I consider a brilliant basic premise of CI:

an improvised dance communication between two or more moving (or relatively still) bodies who are in (and sometimes out of) physical contact, where the “subject” of the conversation that these bodyminds are addressing is: how do the physical forces act on our physical bodies and their movement and how can my bodymind respond to and be in dialogue with these physical forces in concert with another bodymind doing the same? How can we learn about, challenge, and play with these conditions together as physical, mental, cultural beings, and thus manifest a unique and specific contact improvisation dance right now?

This is already a pretty complex conversation without adding or highlighting anything else. But of course there are and always have been more elements in dialogue in this dance form than just physical forces. The underbelly of this CI animal is rich. What manifests itself through each improvisation is a function of the two who are dancing it and their assumptions, information, context, proclivities, histories, interests, personalities, intentions, and more.

I’ve found in my own dancing that adding additional foci to group improvisations that involve CI—a study of changing states, compositional awareness and action, relationships with music—creates a satisfying, multifaceted, multidimensional dance field, but it does tend to decrease the odds of my having many long, focused, “purely” physical contact improvisation engagements. Is that bad? Certainly not, but it does tell me something about the value and function of limiting the focus and privileging the physical phenomena, at least as a basic reference that one might return to or through.

One of the most generative aspects of CI, in my opinion, is that in its basic physical premise it is (or attempts to be) empty of any specific agenda or outcome other than “Do no harm.” In this way, its emptiness makes it eternally available to be filled with you, your partner(s), and your perspectives and interests. Keeping it empty, and attending to the physical as a basic reference that one might return to or through.

Maybe there is no pure physical form of CI.

Maybe there are many.

Maybe the reexamination and recombination of CI with other movement forms and subjects will serve to deepen, widen, clarify, and make more accessible CI’s most essential, basic, and useful principles.

Maybe the questions that arise from the dialoguing of CI with other materials will help us—individually and collectively—more clearly perceive and acknowledge what CI is and the particular realities we’re bringing to it—and in the process, help clarify our own choices as to how we proceed with our teaching, practice, and thinking about CI.

In the rub,

Nancy Stark Smith
ON CI INTERSECTIONS

A Question from CQ, and a Round of Responses

We started the ball rolling on this CI Intersections segment of CQ by sending a question to a sampling of 20 international CI practitioners (whom we knew and had email addresses for), inviting them to answer it and to please send the question on to someone whom we might not know who would have an interesting perspective to share on the subject.

We’ve selected a variety of the responses to share here. In addition, we invite you to read ALL of the responses in the CQ CI Newsletter on our website and give us YOUR VIEW of the subject of CI Intersections in the comments.

[CQ editors]

The Question:
In your experience of Contact Improvisation—as dancer, teacher, performer, and/or organizer—what intersections have you encountered where the practice of CI as a physical dance form is integrated with other fields of concern that have an additional agenda/focus? What concerns are you yourself bringing into dialogue with CI—in theory and practice?

Can you succinctly describe an intersection you’ve experienced and some of the conflicts/challenges/discoveries you have experienced?

Some examples of CI intersections: CI and contemporary dance, tango, the exploration of sexuality/sensuality, body politics, social and racial justice, community, research, academic dance training, gender and identity, performance, aesthetics, choreography, ecstatic dance, martial arts, other improvisational movement practice, spiritual practice, somatic practice, vacation, therapy, bodywork.

Please speak to this issue in any way you want to. Be specific.
Word limit: 150-300 words. Thank you.

Keith Hennessy

Under the influence of both Bucky Fuller and punk, I have never been a specialist. I prioritize cross-disciplinary activity, working best in friction and complexity. Therefore, dancing contact has always been an intersectional practice. Also, because I’m both a sensitive gay and a defiant queer, I have not always felt held within the cultural boundaries of CI.

In the ’90s I was very engaged with CI as a vehicle for studying gender, sexuality, and intimacy. At 848 Community Space in San Francisco, some of us intentionally blurred the boundaries between contact jam, intimacy training, feminist consciousness raising, and queer advocacy. Having never trusted the proposal to prioritize physics over chemistry, I was especially focused on adapting the liberatory play of contact to workshops intending to nurture positive gay and queer sexualities that might survive the overwhelming devastation of AIDS. For years I brought CI-inspired dance and somatic practices to gay male sex and intimacy trainings, and then slowly I allowed the influence to flow in the opposite direction, bringing practices from BDSM and ritualized safer-sex trainings into my CI teaching.

CI is an excellent playground for observing and experimenting with the gendered dynamics of power, leading/yielding, and negotiation. How are decisions made or impulses followed while improvising in physical contact with another person? How are these observations useful or metaphorical for understanding social relationships in the worlds outside the studio? For over 10 years I have been focused on the intersection of CI and critical race studies. How have structures of white supremacy been revealed, produced, ignored, and/or destabilized by CI? How might CI, practiced consciously and critically, help us understand our racial and ethnic identities and histories? Is CI a white dance? If not, how is it positioned in relation to whiteness or diaspora?

The Politics of Perception
Ann Cooper Albright

The training in many Contact Improvisation classes (including my own) begins with somatic perception, the place where vision and tactile sensation merge to produce a kinesthetic sensibility. But perception is also a form of organization, and like all organizations it holds an implicit politics within its structure. For a long time, I felt that there was an implicit refusal in many (though certainly not all) Contact classes to address issues of cultural difference, including gender and race, or to respond to issues of sexual harassment within the larger sociopolitical contexts of our dancing environments. I believe that such a refusal effectively whitewashes somatic practices, limiting the kinds of people who feel welcome.
In the meshing of lived experience with cultural representation, perception is the crossroads where we meet or miss one another—either connecting in good faith with a shared purpose or stumbling through missteps that can result in a defensive posture or a sense of distrust of those around us.

It is through our bodies that perception meets up with political identities, and that experience needs to be acknowledged. I am interested in exploring a way to use Contact training to cultivate an interconnected feeling between people while also allowing for the resistance and disruption that informed Ishmael Houston-Jones’s and Fred Holland’s contact-related intervention in the 1980s or Mayfield Brooks’s in 2014. Engaging with resistance while moving together not only sets up compelling movement possibilities but also proposes the terms for working out our politics in motion.

Geneviève Cron-Riger

I enjoyed dancing and jumping since a young age, and dance was an activity like any other: I was taught how; I copied just like gym, acrobatics, sport, ballet, modern contemporary, social dances. Sometimes we had "creative” activities like sensing and improvisation, playing with an object, or creating a performance.

But I professionally chose to study math and logic, and became an engineer and research scientist. The research methodologies I’ve been taught and that I’ve been using involved

A. understanding universal principles given by teachers;
B. problem solving by making connections / logic between these principles;
C. making hypotheses and demonstrating: knowing the aim and converging toward it.

Practicing CI and other forms of improvisation—and seeing it not only as a practice but also as a research methodology—opened me to other ways of “searching and discovering.”

The aspects of CI that conflicted (at first glance but also enriched my research methodologies) were

A. subjective principles and theories: it seemed to me that each CI practitioner and teacher had her own questions and principles built on her own practice and truth;
B. embodied research: using body, needs, impulse, sensations, instinct—not only using logic and brain;
C. possibility to practice without any known direction of research and being open to emptiness and no discovery: raising questions, not knowing.

By combining the old and the new approaches, I have more confidence in my findings.

At the same time, my CI practice extended my understanding of dance—as both a physical practice and a research based on personal choices.

MOV&PHILO Encounters
Daniela Schwartz

The MOV&PHILO Encounters took place in Buenos Aires in 2015, 2016, and 2017, initiated by myself in collaboration with Mariela Singer, Carolina Tironi, Belen Arenas Arce, Matias Miranda, and Soledad Gutierrez. These encounters are anarchic individual and collective research meetings to explore the relationship between movement & philosophy. A group of about 16 dancers with experience in CI & Improvisation—some of them deeply immersed in philosophy, sociology, and political sciences—met six Saturdays in Jan/Feb and explored.

The invitation was directly launched to colleagues: CI dancers & improvisers interested in Improvisation in dance and in theoretical thinking, with the idea to not fix a structure but to encourage self-responsibility in the survival of participants’ practice/research within the...
spontaneity of the relationships created by reading, listening, speaking, thinking, writing, watching, gesturing, moving, dancing.

We only set the duration—four hours in the studio—and the commitment to read the texts that were sent to us before each meeting. Mariela selected our bibliography with our agreement. I suggested to the group to report the experience through writing and sharing it by email as the experience settled. I also created a library with the reports and with dance-, theory-, philosophy-, and art-related books and texts in order to share resources.

We thought of these meetings as a co-creation among all participants but also a co-creation between Improvisation in dance and philosophy. We didn’t want to apply philosophical theories to the body, or to think about the body and its possibilities. We imagined a transdisciplinary encounter, a co-creation, as it happens in a CI dance.

From these encounters emerged the wish to create more bridges between philosophy & Improvisation in dance, and the interest to deepen into a methodology for both of the disciplines to be nourished.

The potential of the transdisciplinarity in the encounter was rich and exciting to me. I’m planning to continue in Spain, with Jonathan Martineau as an ally!

Kent Alexander

All of us have our being in a place of memory. My relationship with others (politics) reflects my relationship with my people’s past. Black emancipation was followed by one hundred years of institutionalized subjugation through the enactment of Jim Crow laws and lynchings; violence and mass incarceration continue to this day. Such violence against the Black body intertwines to create a kind of post-traumatic slave syndrome, to use the phrase coined by Dr. Joy DeGruy.

More than once, I have been told that confronting race on the dance floor minimizes losing oneself in the exploration. However, it is clear to me that race permeates the way we come together and occupy space. Blackness lives in my movements, my gestures, my postures. It is part of how I organize my physicality and how I picture myself in any group, particularly one that is predominantly white.

As a Black male, I have been encouraged by the dominant (white) culture to

- occupy less space than whites, thereby not using the full range of my kinetic-sphere;
- be non-threatening, thereby developing a fear of movement that divides attention between movement and the desire not to offend;
- view my Black body as something that gets acted upon, producing a sense of flight from the perceived threat of white people moving toward me to either fetishize or attack.

By examining race, we make intentional space for inclusivity and freedom. When all participants acknowledge the limitations of white normative spaces, the CI community learns to liberate itself from a white normative reality. This permits more space to embody the dance that is happening, bringing us closer to a CI ideal and inviting a deeper critical reflection on power structures both inside and outside CI spaces.

Healing with Community Trust
Zach Arfa

Every summer, 70 young performers transform an outdoor landscape into an epic performance where the audience enters a story, physically moving through the world they’ve created. I love my work as the music director of the Hilltown Youth Performing Arts Programs. We also host the Recovery Theatre, an intensive for young people overcoming addiction. A practice we call “training,” essentially full-body follow-the-leader, is central to our programs. It’s full of climbing and sprinting; we hoist people into the air on giant wooden spools or launch them off a flying trapeze. This exploration of physical risk taking and committed support allows kids to share their most intimate insecurities after just a few hours of meeting.

As I first learned Contact Improvisation, my body would panic at the prospect of trusting someone with my full weight. But during my first jam, I could feel the whole-hearted fervor of the room, as intertwined bodies flew around me and I danced with abandon. All of a sudden, my feet rose a few inches and landed just left of where they
had started. My partner had just given me a lift in which I felt safe and supported. I was both spooked (gasp!) and hooked (laughter).

I am interested in developing this practice of physical trust that rests at the center of CI and other kinds of emotional healing. This sense of trust is not just between individuals but one that runs through a whole group, encouraging fearless acts of bravery and vulnerability. Rigorous physical practice with others creates a space to fully trust ourselves and rely on the community to keep us safe. With my budding dance skills, I feel compelled to create more communities that connect through dancing and flying, forging a bond of togetherness that holds every single person in its embrace.

Inclusion or Invisibility for POC in CI

*Taja Will*

"I'm not ready yet.
Who am I supposed to be right now? Do you need something from me? Where do I belong?
Do I owe you something? Do you need to prove something to me? Do you need my help? Are you afraid of me?
Is there room for me here? Do you even see me?
I'm not ready yet."

This is the internal dialogue I have the first few minutes I enter a contact improvisation space, as I meet the eyes of fellow practitioners, as they graze by me, as they invite me in, as I feel tokenized, as I feel invisibilized... A loud monologue that defies personal preference and reflects the distress of marginalization.

Racialized culture is embedded in our daily experiences. As an international adoptee and queer woman of color, I don’t believe in spontaneous equality. Liberalist ideas of inclusion I hear in CI spaces sound something like “all are welcome here; here we are all equals,” which perpetuates a guise of radical acceptance. This definition of inclusion *does not* promote the visibility of people of color (POC) in CI culture.

**No shaming, guilt is futile.** This is an invitation for more expansive awareness. I promise to take responsibility for my own experience. My questions for you are:

- How does Privilege dance?
- How does Privilege enter space?
- How can the awareness of traumatic histories inform touch?
- How can it inform attention?

**Let's have these conversations.**

Issues of diversity and inclusion aren’t new conversations, but our current sociopolitical climate is requiring that these dialogues continuously update. A safe space for a white practitioner is *not the same* as a safe space for a POC practitioner. Folks with marginalized identities are somatically and psychically guarded, from generations past and a lifetime of systemic oppression; *it is in the body, and it will enter the dance.*

**Kathleen Rea**

The concept and implementation of consent has recently become a driving force in my practice and facilitation of CI. I trace the birth of this thinking to an intersection I experienced between CI and sexuality/sensuality while attending my first Touch&Play festival two years ago. A friend submitted a teaching application for us, and I agreed, not knowing much about the festival. A week before going, I looked up the event and immediately felt uncomfortable with the content. In my past, I had experienced unpleasant boundary violations and harassment in the CI community. I assumed the chances were high that in CI workshops exploring intimacy and sexuality, I would spend much of my time defending against non-consensual touch. I was committed to teaching, so I attended with many reservations.

However, my experience was the opposite. T&P fused CI with tantra, kink, and BDSM, which are all practices grounded in a strong frame of consent. Through these intersection modalities, we spent much time practicing ways to obtain consent and express boundaries for all types of touch and energetic exchanges. We practiced verbal and nonverbal techniques and took these explorations onto the dance floor. I experienced an epiphany when I said “no” to an offer of a hug, and the other person...
cheered my ability to put up a boundary. My CI practice flourished as I discovered the boundless joy and freedom that came from dancing with a group invested in creating a consent-based culture within which to dance. I left with a passion for learning more about consent practices. This desire led me to create the Contact Improv Consent Culture Blog and to produce workshops and discussion circles for my CI community on the subject.

touching myself: a refusal of contact improvisation  
mayfield brooks

As a critical participant in the dance form known as Contact Improvisation (CI), I approach these questions with trepidation due to the oversaturated culture of whiteness in the so-called “Contact Community.” At this point, I have moved away from defining dance that involves touch, weight sharing, and partnering as Contact Improvisation. I have come to see CI more as a constellation of somatics and dance practices that involve an incredible multiplicity of elements as diverse as acrobatic athleticism and the practice of “trust falls” with a partner. I place CI within a continuum of improvisational dance that has certain parameters, skills, and historical knowledge attached to it.

I said all that to say that I am actually in a place of refusal with CI. I rarely go to jams because they most often feel unwelcome to me as a black, queer, non-binary person. Because there seems to be an element of assumed “community” in CI without an examination of the implications of such assumptions, I practice refusal within that context. Nevertheless, I do love the form and am now finding ways to love it by creating language that is more inclusive when I teach CI. For example, I never assume that people want to be touched. As a black person constantly dealing with anti-black violence, I understand trauma as a prerequisite to my very existence or—more aptly put—non-existence. This colors the way I interact with Contact Improvisation and is part of my refusal to fully embrace CI as a practice. CI is not just a dance, it’s a culture, and I am noticing that others are also cross-examining the assumptions around touch, acceptance, and free will that run rampant in CI culture.

My approach, my refusal, to CI is rooted in an ongoing practice that I have coined “Improvising While Black (IWB),” which centers blackness in its approach to Improvisation in general, specifically with Contact Improvisation, and allows me to accept my conflicted feelings when entering a CI class, workshop, or jam as a black person. I challenge myself to practice refusal. I make noise, disrupt comfort cuddle zones, and keep dancing, touching myself and other objects, asking permission to touch others, and doing CI (see I/eye) on my own terms.

FIND MORE responses to the CI Intersections question—by Asaf Bachrach, Colleen Bartley, Radical Contact, Richard Kim, Ming-Shen Ku, Sasha Lasdon, Yeong Wen Lee, Angelique Niekerk, Steve Paxton, and Heike Pourian—in the CI Newsletter on our website, www.contactquarterly.com. We hope you’ll add your thoughtful consideration of the topic there as well!

Mayfield Brooks

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