

STILL. *moving*

STILL MOVING addresses the current thinking, perception, and practice of Contact Improvisation —i.e., **Contact Shoptalk**.

Please participate by sending your writings and your responses to: submissions@contactquarterly.com or by snail mail.

Contact Improvisation: One Experience

by SK, Rythea Lee, and CQ

Last April, I got an email from a woman I had never met before (referred to here as “SK”), asking for advice about how to handle a particularly disturbing experience she had had at a CI festival. Simply stated, it involved an unwanted sexual advance by a festival organizer during a CI dance. In our subsequent email volleys, I was impressed by SK’s ability to articulate her experience, her courage in pursuing the subject, and her clarity and intelligence in discussing different approaches she might take in following up on the incident.

After several rounds of emails, I asked SK how she’d feel about including Rythea Lee in our communication. Although I was honored by SK’s trust and was very engaged in our exchange, I began to feel that my good instincts were not quite sufficient in addressing the situation. Rythea, a dance colleague in Northampton, MA, does Contact, Authentic Movement, and many other forms of improvisational movement and performance, and is a sexual abuse survivor. Her main practice as a trained therapist is creative work with sexual abuse and trauma survivors. SK said yes. It was a very fruitful exchange.

SK welcomed the idea of sharing some of our letters with CQ readers. We attempted to edit the voluminous and fascinating emails into a manageable piece, but ultimately we felt it was best to keep this article concise and let it be encouragement for more articulation and dialogue.

SK: “I have arrived at a point where I think maybe it is no longer about my personal relation to the incident. I may have to just drop that or dance through it. But to focus on simply sharing my experience in written form—maybe this could stimulate a wider discussion and raise awareness that this is going on, and possibly encourage others to speak without blame.”

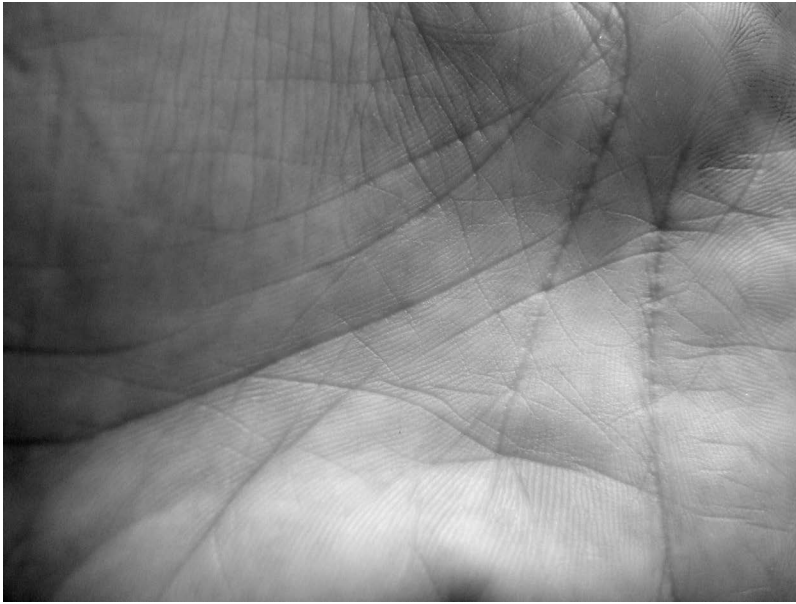
Sometime during the middle of our emailing, SK decided to write a letter to all the festival organizers. It is printed below, followed by some closing comments from Rythea. [NSS for CQ]

Formal letter addressed to all the festival organizers:

Having recently seen the advert for this year’s Contact Festival, I was triggered by my experience of last year’s event. After giving it some time and thought, I feel it necessary to write to you directly. I wish to be transparent about what happened then, for reasons of self-respect and for the fact that it touches the general area of “safe space” in CI. In my experience, not only as a participant but also as a teacher, I feel this is an important subject that can get overlooked, especially in the context of a festival.

During last year’s festival, there was an incident that I found disturbing. It took place between one of the organisers (Mr A) and myself. I do not feel comfortable to address this person alone, therefore I feel it wise to include two people I trust who are connected. They are this year’s co-organiser, Mr B, and Ms C, in whose workshop the incident happened. I include Ms C, as I know her to be an experienced CI teacher. To be very clear, the following is an account of my personal experience and from my own perspective. Previous to this incident, I had never met Mr A.

I was invited as a teacher/participant to the CI festival by a colleague and friend. In one of the workshops led by Ms C, I partnered up with Mr A for an exercise. During our dance, Mr A joined a second female dancer, and the two of them were both on top of me lying on the ground. Up to that point we had been having a healthy dance dialogue.



I attach a detailed photograph I took of my own hand a few years ago. I like it for the pathways in the skin. And although it's not obviously a hand, I know it is an open hand, which is what sharing this experience means to me—an offering to become more aware. [SK]

At this moment, Mr A pinned my shoulders down to the floor and said to me directly, “We have not been to bed together yet.” He and the other dancer were laughing. I tried to push them off, but he continued and pushed his face into my neck. I found it distressing, and I tried to pull away, but he continued. I repeated a number of times, “Get off me,” and tried to move away, but he continued to hold me down. I was shocked, and it took all my strength to free my body.

From my perspective, I gave a very clear signal that said “NO” and made it more than once. I drew a clear line that said this is my boundary and, for my feeling, this was very clearly violated. I did not feel comfortable at that moment to share this in the closing circle and confront Mr A with it. As it is a sensitive subject, I was not sure if the people present were experienced mediators and was not willing to take the risk. I do not agree with “policing” the dance community, but I do feel it important that people get feedback on this kind of behaviour. My intention in writing to you three is to be transparent about this incident and my experience of it and not to seek a response from anyone. The opportunity for this did not arise last year, so now I choose to take this step. I will not be attending this year’s festival, as I do not want to be associated with or participate in events organised by people whom I cannot trust and whose interests I do not share.

*Sincerely,
SK*

Closing thoughts from Rythea:

Through the years, I have seen much silence, confusion, anger, and fear related to calling people out on inappropriate or hurtful behavior in the CI community. I want to be a voice for growth and change around this issue because I understand the intense emotion, memory, and defensiveness that arise from the subject of “abuse” or “violation” or “confrontation.”

For now, what I believe could work is if small “task forces” were created in CI communities that were available to help with conflict and resolution. These task forces would follow a protocol that supported the privacy of the person reporting and also offer clear, yet loving ways to talk to the person in question. The main objective would be to *bring the issue into the light*, so that silence, collusion, power differentials, and abuses could be dealt with intelligently and with consequence. The people on the task forces have to be clear enough with their own issues to hold space for those who are confused or scared, which is why some training is required. I would like to help develop a protocol and create teams that hold individuals accountable, bring deeper yet respectful communication into the community, and make CI events a more transparent and thus safer place to be for everyone. [RL]



Over the years, many CI events and communities have drawn up jam guidelines as well as created processes for dealing with issues of this nature. Send in relevant links or documents, and we'll find a way to share them on CQ's website.

To follow up with Rythea about her task force idea, you can reach her at rythea@crocker.com or www.zanyangels.com.