

How the First Rule Brought #MeToo to Contact Improvisation

“At first glance, the first rule seems logical and wise, and indeed, it’s a good rule. It is a necessary and useful element of a comprehensive safety strategy. But on its own, it is insufficient. And as the first priority, it is actively pernicious.”

by Michele Beaulieux

A #MeToo disruption occurred at the West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam (wcciJAM) this year. Twelve people sat in the middle of the dance floor at the Saturday evening jam and told their stories of harassment, assault, marginalization, and invisibility in CI. One sign said: “LOOK AROUND. WHO IS MISSING?”

My answer? I am. And many others, too.

The concept of negative space—the space around and between the subjects of a picture—can help us look at who is not in the CI community. A sign held by Cookie Harrist, the organizer of the disruption, addressed her absence: “I HAVE BEEN A VICTIM OF NONCONSENSUAL TOUCH AND PREDATORY BEHAVIOR IN C.I. SPACES. IT HAS KEPT ME FROM COMING TO JAMS + CLASSES.”

I danced CI for decades, but I haven’t danced CI since a man attempted sexual contact with me at a jam four years ago. I extracted myself from that dance, had some words with him, and told the jam leaders. They spoke to him, and he opted not to return.

Despite that incident and some discussions, the leaders did not institute the types of changes—such as a code of conduct prioritizing seeking consent—that could prevent future occurrences. I didn’t feel comfortable letting people touch me at the jam anymore. I couldn’t relax, so I haven’t gone back. And I learned that after I left, other women also endured inappropriate behavior from other men.

Around the world, the CI community has lost dancers due to sexual harassment, including unwanted sexual contact, as well as other types of sexual violence occurring during and outside of classes and jams.¹ People missing from CI dances include the women who “were never seen at the jam again” in Martin Keogh’s frequently

cited article “101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust,”² and the women who told their trigger-warning-worthy stories in the zine *Respecting Boundaries/Coexisting Genders: Women’s Experiences of Feeling Unsafe in Contact Improv.*³

The intersectional approach of the #MeToo disruption at the wcciJAM shed light on the ways CI has lost dancers due to sexism and misogyny, racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, other isms and phobias, and combinations of the above. As a white, able-bodied cisgender woman, my lens is sexual violence, so this article focuses on sexual safety. Physical, emotional, and spiritual safety is critical, too, and some of the same concepts may apply.

The first rule...

CI’s loss of dancers can be traced to the assumptions under which it is now typically practiced. While perhaps not known by name to all CI practitioners, the first rule of contact improvisation, “take care of yourself,” undergirds the common CI ethos. In his blog post “Rules,” Richard Kim explains:

It’s called the First Rule of CI, or the Only Rule, or... maybe the Fundamental Principle. Its shorthand version is “take care of yourself,” but I’ve heard it expressed as, “Above all else, you are responsible for yourself.”

Martin Keogh expands:

In Contact Improvisation there is a basic principle that each person takes responsibility for him- or herself. I am the only person who can be inside my body, so I need to keep a part of me awake—the part that



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[left to right] Michael McDougall, Cookie Harrist, Susala Kay, Devin Pastika, Ronja Ver, and Morgan True at the disruption at wcciJAM, 2018, Berkeley, CA.

can sense and communicate (physically or verbally) my needs, limits, and desires. I need to keep myself safe...⁴

At first glance, the first rule seems logical and wise, and indeed, it's a good rule. It is a necessary and useful element of a comprehensive safety strategy. But on its own, it is insufficient. And as the first priority, which is how it has been presented in CI communities, it is actively pernicious. The first rule is an armored individualistic response to being in a group. It is good advice for guerilla warfare, but hopefully not for an art form highly dependent on human touch and relationships. It fails to recognize our interdependence and community.

The first rule has persisted, nevertheless. Most contact improvisation jam guidelines follow its spirit,⁵ devoting more words to the responsibility to say no than to the responsibility not to violate. Keogh does add, "and I also need to make sure I don't hurt others," but then references this practice only in passing.

The CI community's acceptance of the first rule laid the foundation for the sexual violence protested at the wcciJAM. The first rule is problematic for multiple reasons: it sides with privilege, is difficult to use, fails to prevent violations, promotes victim blaming, and changes who participates.

sides with privilege and power,

We all violate and have been violated, but some of us are more likely to violate and others to be violated. Violations can be major or minor, sexual or nonsexual, intentional or accidental. While we all have privileges, some of us have more privileges and, thus, more power than others. We do not come to CI on equal footing. The privileged are more likely to violate, and men bring their societal privilege into CI spaces.

Sexual harassment and assault are gendered crimes: men are the vast majority of people who commit sexual

¹ For definitions of terms, see Holly Kearn, *The Facts behind the #MeToo Movement: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault*, Feb. 2018, www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Full-Report-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault.pdf.

² Martin Keogh, *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 28:2, 2003, 61.

³ *CQ Contact Improvisation Newsletter Online*, Vol. 42:2, 2017, www.contactquarterly.com (click on "CI Newsletter")

⁴ Keogh, *CQ*, 2003, 61.

⁵ Benjamin Pierce, moderator, *A Compendium of CI Jam Guidelines (and Related Stuff) from around the World*, contactimprovphilly.com/compendium.html

violations, and women are the majority of people who endure those violations.⁶ Cookie Harrist pithily summed up likely violators in her Facebook post reporting on the disruption. She said: “TIME IS UP FOR CREEPY WHITE DUDES IN CI.” And the person who attempted sexual contact with me was a cisgender able-bodied white man I’ll call “Paul.”

In CI and in the world, our varying degrees of privilege influence how we initiate and respond to sexual behavior in ways of which we may not even be aware. In Kathleen Rea’s blog post “‘That lady’: The story of what happened when a woman put up a boundary in the contact improv world,” she recognizes the inability of the first rule to address the impact of power in CI spaces. She states, “In situations where consent becomes blurry due to being on the lower end of a power imbalance, I think the tenet that we each are responsible for protecting our own boundaries falls short.”

The first rule is not neutral; it sides with people more likely to violate by putting the onus on those who are violated (and typically lack privilege) to object to the behavior. The implicit message is that harassed people should say no more vehemently. The privileged members of the group are less likely to need to defend themselves and are better able to when they do. The first rule is for their benefit, allowing them to dance with abandon; it’s just for everyone else to use.

is difficult and unpleasant to use,

The first rule expects individuals to ward off unwelcome advances, but that can be complicated to do. In Sarah Gottlieb’s blog post “Myths to Break Down: Moving Toward Ethical Communication and Ethical Sexuality in CI,” she shows how “the leap from dancing to verbally saying ‘no’ is not easy.” The first rule puts the responsibility on potential victim-survivors to police others’ behavior toward them. That requires either anticipatory ESP or responding to a violation already in process—hardly ideal scenarios. Keogh and others advocate teaching physical and verbal skills to say no, yet while those skills may be helpful in some situations, they are difficult to apply across the board.

⁶ Kearl, *Facts*, 7, 8.

TRIGGER WARNING for the following paragraph: Explicit description of unwanted sexual contact.

Taking care of myself in my encounter with Paul, for example, wasn’t easy or pleasant. I did not want to believe that what was happening was happening. I switched into assessment mode and tried to figure out whether to draw the line. As the dance went on, I felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way he was touching me. He stroked me, or you could say, petted me, like a lover might do. He also touched and leaned on me in a repetitive rhythm that was reminiscent of sex. His sexualized movement accumulated to the point that I felt sure that it wasn’t accidental or inadvertent: it was deliberate. When he positioned his legs to straddle me from behind so that his genitals could rub up against me, I had had enough. I was not going to let him dry-hump me. I got up and walked to the chairs on the edge of the room. I took care of myself, but I was shaken.

Asserting boundaries in a forthright manner is not fun and may be particularly difficult for women who have been socialized to please, who have reason to fear male anger, and whose voices and trust have been repeatedly disrespected. In addition, people uncomfortable being physically intimate with strangers, people whose boundaries have been repeatedly violated, and people who have difficulty maintaining boundaries may find CI overwhelming.

The skills to say yes and no can be learned and developed over time but will never be foolproof. We cannot rely on defensive tactics as the primary method for assuring consensual dances. Not everyone will be able to communicate discomfort in every interaction. While some people fight or flee in dangerous situations, others freeze. A talent and skill in fending off sexual advances should not be a prerequisite for participating in CI.

does not prevent violations,

The first rule asks people to defend their own boundaries rather than fostering respect for others’ boundaries. It is a risk-reduction strategy for potential victim-survivors rather than a prevention strategy for stopping potential violators from initiating acts of sexual violence in the first place. If we begin with prevention, potential victim-survivors might not even be put in the position of having to say no. It shouldn’t have been up

“A talent and skill in fending off sexual advances should not be a prerequisite for participating in CI.”

to me to halt Paul’s sexualized touch; it should have been up to him not to do it.

The first rule focuses on what potential victim-survivors can do to lower their risk of being victimized, but that doesn’t do anything to help the next potential victim-survivor. After Paul’s unwelcome touching, I learned that other women had been following the first rule, taking care of themselves and avoiding direct contact with Paul. One made sure to dance with him only in a trio, never a duet. Their strategies worked for them but failed to prevent his subsequent sexualized touch with me the first time we danced together.

Defensive skills are useful, but they aren’t the place to start. In his blog post, Kim acknowledges that the first rule provides an excuse for not being proactive in preventing sexual harassment. By sending the message that the violated will need to fend for themselves, the individual-responsibility mandate gives those who repeatedly violate license to operate. Paul was able to continue his behavior with multiple women until it escalated and I complained.

leads to victim blaming,

The first rule reinforces our natural tendencies to support existing power structures and blame victims for their misfortunes. We want to believe that the world is fair and victims get what they deserve,⁷ but the world is not fair. Psychiatrist Judith Herman explains the allure of siding with perpetrators: perpetrators ask “that the bystander do nothing” while victims ask “the bystander to share the burden of pain.”⁸

Telling dancers to take care of themselves in a high-touch environment is like telling women not to go out at night. Sexual assault risk-reduction information that advises women how to behave increases victim blaming and shifts perceived responsibility away from violators.⁹

The first rule focuses on potential victim-survivors’ behavior rather than potential violators’ behavior. After my encounter with Paul, I was treated as the problem. I was told that it would be best for me not to come to the

jam until the leader had spoken to Paul. But if the jam wasn’t safe for me, it wasn’t safe for anyone. In addition, the original written announcement about Paul’s actions did not validate my experience. It presented a he said/she said balanced synopsis and did not include the facts that that day’s jam leader had “sensed an off energy” and other women had also expressed discomfort with Paul’s behavior.

Individuals’ ability to say no is nurtured by group and societal norms. Believing that a no will be heard and respected in the community requires trust, and trust is built over time. When victim blaming is prevalent, victim-survivors are less likely to report abuses and more likely to leave, as I did.

and changes who participates.

One person behaving inappropriately may have the unintended consequence of keeping many others away. And that scenario is likely in a community following the first rule. The challenge is that the people who violate tend to have power and can dominate. They can be highly visible and often won’t stop or leave without a confrontation, and we generally don’t like, often for good reason, to confront others about misdeeds. In contrast, those who are violated or fear being violated often don’t have power and so leave quietly, don’t come back, or never come in the first place.

When people leave CI in order to avoid predatory behavior, we lose their contributions. A sign at the

⁷ Maia Szalavitz, “Why We’re Psychologically Hardwired to Blame the Victim,” Feb. 27, 2018, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/27/victim-blaming-science-behind-psychology-research

⁸ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 7.

⁹ Carl P. Jago and Nicholas J. S. Christenfeld, “The Impact of Sexual Assault Prevention Information on Perceived Control and Victim Blaming,” July 3, 2018, psyarxiv.com/m8qwc

wcciJAM #MeToo disruption quoted *Daily Show* co-creator Lizz Winstead speaking to this loss: “How much Brilliance have we LOST because of these sexual predators who destroyed the careers of SO MANY?” The CI community would look very different if the people who have left had stayed. Their participation would make us a richer, more vibrant community.

Moving beyond the first rule

CI can create an environment in which more people will stay and participate by inverting the first rule and prioritizing the care of the community and other people within it. Safer brave spaces—that is, spaces that are as safe as possible, enabling people to be brave—start with community-level safeguards focused on respecting others’ boundaries. Only then can individuals dance freely.



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#MeToo DISRUPTION at the 2018 West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam

by Cookie Harrist

Last December, I was invited onto the teaching team for the 2018 West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam (wcciJAM), due to take place in June 2018. In February, after a jam in Berkeley, a cisgender male contact dancer followed me home, touched me, and made sexual advances without my consent. Triggered and stunned by the incident, I stopped attending CI classes and jams until wcciJAM approached, and I realized I had to reinvest in the practice. Devin Pastika organized a meeting with two wcciJAM organizers and myself to discuss issues of safety and visibility for trans and gender-nonconforming people attending the event. The 2018 wcciJAM’s explicit theme was “Deconstructing Power,” and so our conversation at this meeting investigated the intersections between transphobia, homophobia, racism, ableism, and patterns of sexual assault that appear in CI spaces.

Empowered by this conversation and fed up with the prevalence of my peers’ stories of sexual assault and boundary crossings in the form, I decided I would sit in the jam as a disruption. After all, I had been sitting at home for the last five months instead of attending jams. I put the word out to my community about the action and gathered twelve people to join me. While I was specifically enacting a #MeToo protest for myself, I invited folks to sit with me to voice any kind of invisibility, harm, or danger that they feel present in the practice of CI.

Before the start of the jam, we gathered and made signs about our experiences. We entered the space and sat in the middle of the jam silently for about fifteen minutes. The jam came to a halt as dancers walked around and read our signs. Many people sat with us in solidarity, and many cried. We began to speak about our experiences through a megaphone. Some dancers resisted the conversation but other dancers stepped in and told them it was time to listen. Some people continued to dance. One perpetrator’s name was said aloud. In my opinion, the disruptive action was a success in that it inconvenienced

perpetrators, putting them on notice, and educated dancers about the significant prevalence of these problems in our community. It forced everyone to look at this continually unfolding wound. It brought the discussion out from behind closed doors and intellectual debates to where perpetrators could not ignore the impacts of their actions. We cannot allow sexual predators and ignorant members of our community to continue to enact emotional and sexual violence any longer. CI has lost too much beauty and knowledge as dancer after dancer has been forced to walk away.

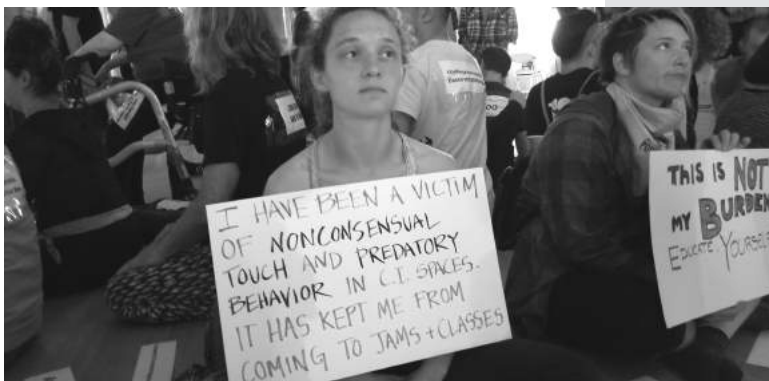


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Cookie Harrist [center] and Morgan True [right] at the disruption at wcciJAM 2018, Berkeley, CA.

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