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Mind-fucking and other uncertainties

a dialogue between (philosopher)
Romain Bigé & (dance improviser)
Charlie Morrissey (and conversely)

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... The stage as laboratory

Romain. Your recent piece, *Wild Card* (2015), with Katy Coe and philosopher Alva Noë, reminds me of one aspect I admire in the first performances of Contact Improvisation (CI): rather than showing a set performance, you show the phenomenon defined by the frame of a practice, giving the onlooker the possibility to observe the emergence of movements.

Charlie. Yes, it was an attempt to show a practice on stage. We'd been practicing in the studio, and wanted to continue the practice with other people present. We kept doing it over several days, and sometimes people would come in and observe, and then we'd talk. It was about doing something in the presence of people, rather than performing for someone. When we brought it to the theater, in Sadler's

Wells in London, we wanted to maintain this sort of relationship in the presence, this time, of Alva Noë and Graeme Miller—an artist who works with sound, but it could have been someone else.

Romain. It seems to me that with this idea of showing a phenomenon, you stick to the idea of the stage as a laboratory, meaning a place where the ordinary conditions of movement and the usual relationships to a milieu are suspended, so that you can observe what is happening in a more relaxed and focused way. You have this empty frame in which things occur, which is opened by the viewer, but this viewer is not exactly the audience, it's someone from the side (here, Alva) who indicates that there is something to see. It reminds me of the "border figures"¹ in Renaissance paintings: a snail, for instance, leaning on the frame of the painting, looking at the scene from the outside, that serves as an invitation to look at what is happening.

Charlie. Often, to me the question is: how to preserve the quality of an improvised phenomenon in front of an audience? It seems to fall apart.

Romain. Henri Maldiney, in a text about French painter Tal Coat,² says that if you throw three rocks on the ground, they are, as such, in perfect alignment; but as soon as you put a frame around them, you lose this harmony in which they seemed to be displayed, because what you did was cut them from their relationship to the overall environment that brought them there.

Charlie. Yes, what I keep realizing is that I need to make things simpler for myself so that I can understand at least *some* of the things that I do. In the studio, this doesn't seem to matter as much: things are being made, and their full meaning can unravel. In the performance, there is a necessity of condensing for the viewer.

In the piece, we start apart, eyes closed, and move progressively towards each other, so that our appetite for moving becomes visible. As soon as we begin touching each other, our movement seems to become more demonstrative, and it comes to an end quite quickly. But there is still that moment right before, when we are about to meet, and there is something about allowing this gradual becoming to be the piece.

Romain. So what you show is the emergence of the reasons for moving, rather than the movement itself. It's about the genesis of movement...

Charlie. Yes, I am arresting my dance compositional mode. I am really interested in unearthing that body of the studio, that mind that sets itself into motion, that is not the thing already defined.

... Imagining reality

Romain. One word that really touched me in your teaching was “mind-fucking” because I think that it's the core proposition of CI: the “Small Dance” is all about that—creating expectations and fucking with them, at least when Steve [Paxton] is guiding it. But one could argue that performance in general is about fucking minds—in the sense of creating illusions. So there is something more in teaching CI: not only do I fuck with your mind (or do you fuck with your own mind?), but I keep bringing your attention towards the process of this mind-fucking. The focus is thus not on the sensory experience itself, but rather on the experience of this experience, the making of this experience: rather than proposing images to sense, we are proposing images so that we can sense our sensing.

Charlie. Yes, seeing the thing I am *seeing with*, rather than the thing I am seeing. Mind-fucking has to do with the idea that the mind is motion, and, as such, is liable to habits. So I am proposing something that doesn't quite fit with the experiences I am used to,

something which permits me to sense what I am enacting for myself.

Romain. One of the mind-fucks you proposed in your class consisted in inviting the dancers to move into the space of their future movement, or move away from the space of their past movement. It felt like experiencing oneself from the inside of a chronophotograph, as if this simple mention had introduced a lag between two or three bodies...

Charlie. Yes, it is exactly what I think mind-fucking is about—creating a kind of phase difference between representations; and they seem to unlock. In the beginning, I was practicing these things in more solid exercises—the anatomical aspect of it. And I just got left with the experience. And when I am teaching, I have to be able to have the experience before I can even talk about it; and if I can't have it in the class, I have to discard it.

Romain. One thing I like about mind-fucking is that, in a sense, it is always “true” or real, meaning it is usually apparently descriptive only: “I move into the space my body will be in.” And yet, just formulating this “reality” suffices to create the lag of perception. There is something about getting rid of the anatomical, in favor of a more purely conceptual way of presenting it, that reminds me a lot of philosophy: when you say “I move into the space of my future body,” you're proposing a conceptual analysis of a phenomenon—except that you propose it as a score, rather than as a universal proposition.

Charlie. I have been trying to figure out what it means to work with the imagination, at least since I have been working with Lisa Nelson. In Steve Paxton's more recent work, *Material for the Spine*, what you do is that you try to really understand the shape of your sit bones, and you work with a lot of pictures of the spine, because you don't want to talk bullshit, but you're still trying to have an experience of them. Now, looking at what so often happens in dance studios, seeing many people rehearsing and the ways in which they change their body qualities when a choreographer would invite them to imagine they are water, for example. And I began to enlarge that question: of course they can in some ways know what it is to be water (after all, they are water to some

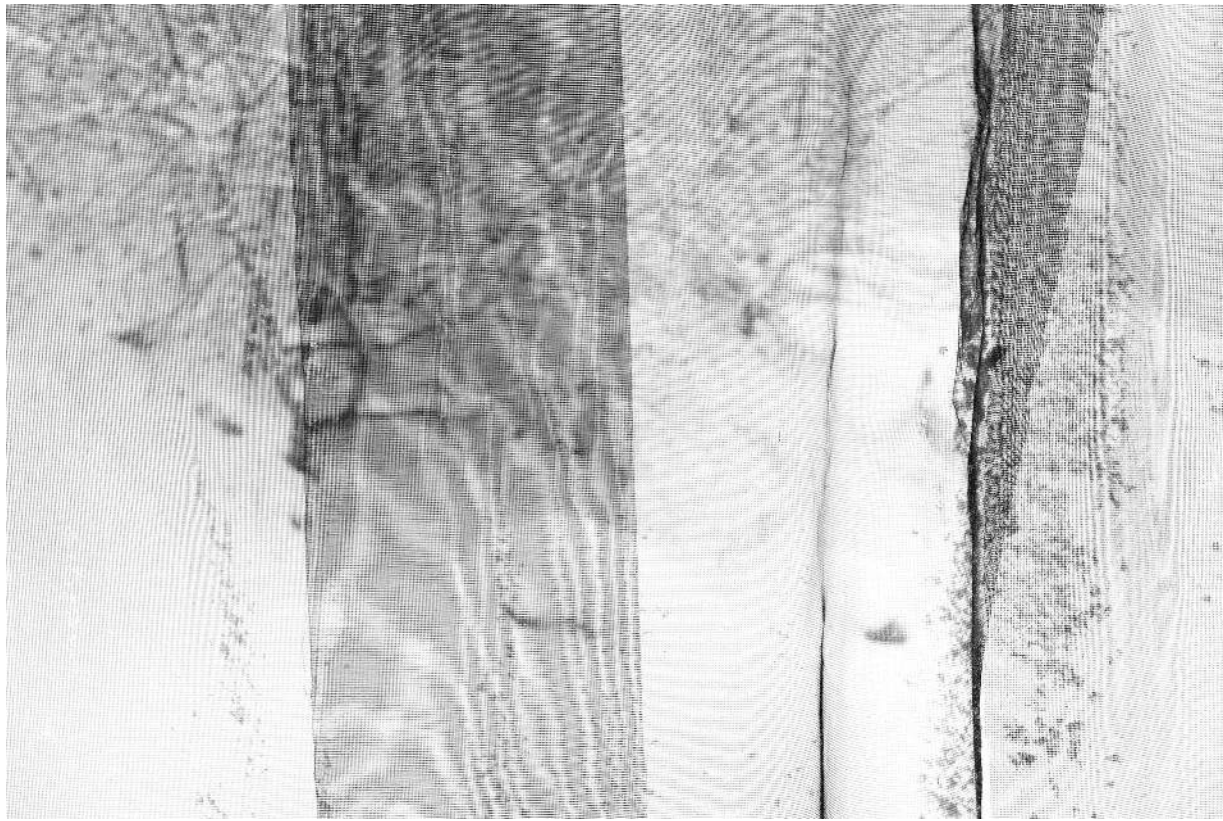


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extent), but there is still something more that is created. And this is what I have been wanting to clarify.

Romain. It seems to me that your images are very specific, though; they are never fictions, they are usually, I come back to this idea, they are usually “real.” So what you’re inviting your students to do is really about “imagining the reality.” It seemed to me that it was, in a very general way, a kind of technique to bring the attention on the perceived objects or situations *as* products of imagination.

Charlie. Yes, I think I am trying to simplify, at least for myself, the process of imagination.

... Constituting the other as an organ to sense oneself

Romain. One of the core propositions in CI is that, being a collaborative dance, you can’t find your dancing but through the other. How do you relate to that in your practice?

Charlie. Well for one, I think that this only becomes clearer and clearer through the years of practice, to the point that I am eventually sensing myself through you.

Romain. And by constituting the other as an organ to sense oneself, we create a kind of inner resonance, a feedback loop: I am listening to you who are listening to me who is listening to you, etc. What is listening but this tension, this resonance between us two?

Yesterday we worked on jumping and falling, which I think is one of the origins of CI in the form of a solo Steve was working on in 1971, and whose score was basically: “how can I jump into the air and not care about the consequences?”

Charlie. A couple of years ago I decided to do a series of performances of those kinds of falls. At the end of the falls, I would take my time, very slowly, and I would start to float away from the ground. I was making an earnest attempt to extricate myself from the gravitational force of the earth! And I talked the audience through my effort to achieve this impossible thing.

Romain. ...it’s about multiplying the grounds, that is: the systems of reference. Am I referring my movement to the Earth beneath me, or to the ceiling, or to the walls? And by constantly changing the referentials (in the Galilean sense), I am in a world where a straight line can be a circle or a spiral.

Charlie. The reversions that Steve is proposing—turning your head, and discovering actually that the back of the head is doing the opposite movement—are really about that, yes. Steve even talks about Material for the Spine as being an exploration of the “dark side” of the body. That’s what we are looking for.

... The body/world split

Romain. One other aspect of your teaching that struck me was that it seemed very much about making the students more vulnerable, more porous to the exteriority, which makes me think that it is exactly the contrary of what a technique is usually about. Techniques are about “body building,” creating layers of protections in front of a changing environment, or solidifying pathways to react to it. So, in a way you’re turning the idea of technique upside down.

Charlie. Yes, and I guess this comes from a frustration about what dance teachers bring to their students, especially in England. It is very difficult to take people’s attention away from the idea of entertainment towards the idea that we’re exploring what being human is. And it seems that the sciences, the cognitive sciences, are moving toward this kind of understanding I am aiming at in experience, perception, imagination, and movement.

Romain. Well certainly, but there is still work ahead, especially now that we’ve rediscovered the psychosomatic unity, and tend to forget that actually, underlying this unity, there is deeper union between the individual and its environment: it’s not enough to say that we are mind-bodies, we are, first and foremost, ecological beings, woven into our surroundings.

Charlie. Yes, and I have my own problems with that. After spending days working with Lisa or Steve, you have your mind blown: working obsessively with one thing for a day or for days. It’s something similar to still images: something, eventually, decays or has to shift; if I do something over and over again, something, at one point, will have to change.

Something that certainly struck me about Steve was and still is his way of looking at things, and his almost pedantic kind of rigor. We would keep doing things for hours, feeling some tiny little things, growing an appetite for moving from a more ascetic practice. I am thinking of those things—working with directions: the back of the head looking forward, or the side of the head looking backward, etc.

Romain. In yesterday’s class, you proposed to consider the idea of “inward reaching” accompanying the more classical outward reach, and I am thinking now: yes, if you repeat a thousand times the same gesture of reaching...

Charlie. If you’ve been investing so much time in just doing the forward reach, when suddenly you can go backwards, it’s like a whole new world. And then it becomes almost a systematic approach to any kind of movement: exploring all the directions, tasting.

Romain. So it’s about repeating a movement so many times that it becomes a world of its own, a whole sphere of expression (as if my language was reduced—instead of the sounds of my throat and movements of mouth—to the forward movement of my arm). And of course you’re discovering all the details in it so that you still have the same refinement of expression. So when you can extend the arm in another direction, all of a sudden it’s like discovering a new area of significance, doubling the world of expressiveness.

Charlie. I guess the work is about finding useful imagery—rather than imaginary connections within my body—to explore; movements that I can trace back to their roots, and then back out again.

Romain. There is something about the privilege of vision in our daily life that I think dance is subverting: as if the whole point of dance as a performing art would be to make vision become tactile or tangible. We talk about “touching the audience,” but often it stays a metaphor. One thing that I like about Contact Improvisation jams is that there is an actual circulation of gravity that is shared between dancers and those who are watching. As potential dancers, the audience in a jam has a floating attention, not focusing on any particular dancer for more than two or three minutes, admiring moves that they may copy in their own ways, participating in the sense of taking their

¹ Daniel Arasse, “The Snail’s Gaze” (2005/trans. Alyson Waters, intranslation.brooklynrail.org, 2008): “[The border figure] is placed at the edge of the space represented on the pictorial surface and at the border of the space of presentation from which it is viewed. ...[I]t marks the beholder’s point of entry into the painting.”

² Henri Maldiney, *Aux déserts que l’histoire accable: L’art de Tal Coat* (Deyrolle, 1996).

part in the dance. This floating attention remains for me a goal in performing or teaching: I don't want to make my students or audience so intent on looking or hearing, because, as Steve often says, "tension masks sensation" and sensation is the goal.

Charlie. Yes we really have to practice different ways of softening the eyes.

Romain. I am thinking of the way theaters are lit: I watch from being in the darkness and you're in the light, so my body is muted or at least invisible.

Charlie. Yes, as audience, I am not implied. That was the thing about Lisa Nelson's Tuning Scores and our piece called *Preparation for the event "Wild Card"*: it's about bringing awareness to the watching. That's why, in our piece, the audience was lit too, and why there was an alternation of darkness and light onstage. Reminding, stating: *this is where we are.*□

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**seeing is being touched is being changed
is being seen is being moved**

Tilting my head to the right, my gaze is seized by a texture of light on the rounded edges of a groove between two floorboards. Beauty is precise.

I dream that a lens might be contagious, that my experience of seeing might be tried on: a garment of light, with the feel of direct experience.

Details bewitch me. Amplified in space, arrested within my context, I welcome the spell.

Sometimes it appears as I read—eyes sweeping over the fields of pages, picking up concepts, making new connections, reflecting my own patterns of thought-as-movement. A word—like a still image—may become silence to rest in. A place to assimilate. An alternate time-scale within which to experience motion.

—Mandoline Whittlesey (photo essay)

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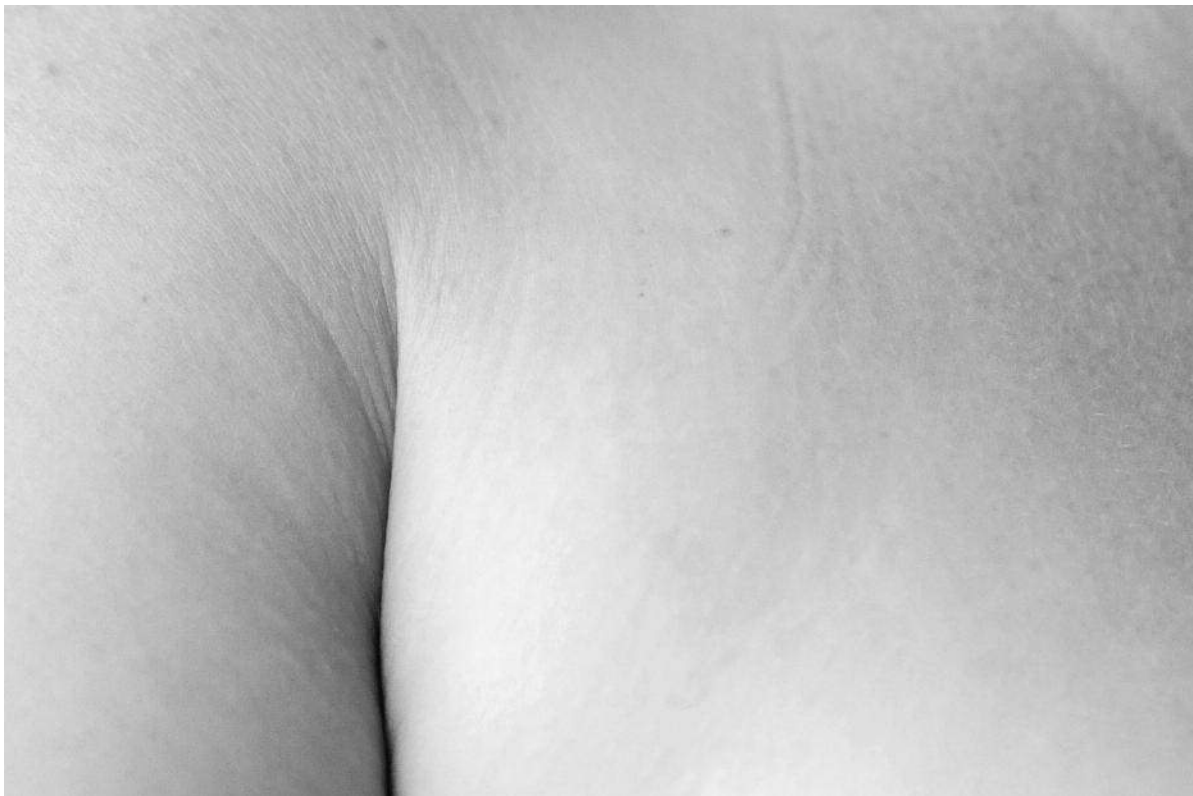


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