

# Queer Contact Improvisation (QCI): alliance and disruption

## Experiences and reflections from the QCI Symposium and Festival Hamburg 2018

by Aramo Olaya and Wiktor Skrzypczak

### Why is CI important for queer activism? What can queerness contribute to CI practice?

CI practice and queer practices can be seen as allies that support each other, but this alliance can't exist without mutual disruption. For us, the term "queer" points to any kind of non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal behavior, feeling, or sensation. Regarding CI, queerness expresses a sensation or feeling of discomfort and the ability to see patriarchal heteronormativity functioning in CI spaces.

One may ask: Since when is CI about sexuality? We pose a need for sexual positivity as one of the possible queer approaches and as a critique of the disregard of feelings and the negation of sexual sensations within CI. If mainstream CI spaces are being set as "pure" spaces without reference to sexuality, they are, in fact, sex-negative, causing taboos and abuse. We need an understanding of sexual expression as something that is somatically basic and inalienable, happening everywhere all the time, which cannot be confined. This means changing our understanding of sexuality altogether. (A deeper conceptual research on this change of perspective about sexuality is not the aim of this article, but it's needed.)

In queer activism, we are very well trained in discursive practices, like creating concepts and discussing them as a group to build a set of values and acceptable and unacceptable practices. We believe our training in discourse could be valuable for CI practice, bringing awareness to the social and political challenges it faces, and also extending conceptual background for the bodily practice in CI. Conversely, we believe the somatic perspective is underdeveloped among the queer movement and a queer approach to the body can advance within a CI framework.

### QCI 2018: program, aims, what we did, disruptions, remaining questions

In spring 2018, 25–35 people, mostly dancers, met in Hamburg at two successive events: a symposium and a dance festival called Queer Contact Improvisation. The symposium was designed for experienced contacters with an aim of artistic research and sharing what queer CI might be and how the dance festival that followed might be facilitated differently than mainstream ones.

The festival itself was conceived as a joyful dance gathering open to inexperienced participants. The workshops during the symposium and the festival had relevant and stimulating themes, such as Filling the Gap; CI as a Tool to Explore Non-monogamous Dynamics; Closeness and Distance during Physical Contact; Sensual Objectification; Feminist, Safer Space! What's That About? Weaving Dominance and Commitment; Dance with Courage; Politics of Mutuality; Beyond Consent; Different Qualities of Touch; and Queering Gaze and Space.

Two sensations dominate our general impression of these events: vital energy and aliveness (as expected from dance practice and embodied sharing) and the effort of expressing and experiencing disagreement. In hindsight, those disruptions appear to have constituted the queerness of the gathering. Examples of "deliberate disruptions" were disagreeing to being part of and possibly objectified through the research; demanding a deep familiarity with and commitment to feminist theory and activism from all participants; limiting the expectation of inclusivity through the facilitation of activities that excluded cis men; acknowledging the need not to be sociable and nice all the time; going topless as a somatic reaction to the heat of the sun despite the possible sexualised interpretation of this gesture; "artistic" intervention of "the nipple police," covering all visible nipples with tape; direct critique of the suggested working formats; and choosing what not to listen to. The "unintentional disruptions" included expressing one's own vulnerability and traumas in a highly empathetic community, and directly expressing one's own unconscious propensities, such as reluctance in the choice of a partner for an exercise. Other disruptions were experienced as self-confrontations: choosing which problematic issues to address publicly and which to deal with privately (the question of responsibility for the emotional labor), confronting one's shame around being a privileged cis man, or realizing oneself not to be as loving and inclusive as one had believed oneself to be.

One participant wrote: "In the last jam, I was dancing, laughing, and crying at the same time. I didn't know why, what happened." What was the joy of our meeting? When we read participants' words from the last sharing we realized that great joy was mainly described as a private, bodily sensation: being empowered, comforted, or grounded; taking up space. The joyful *interpersonal*



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Participants of the QCI symposium during the workshop *Beyond Consent*, with teacher Aramo Olaya; Hamburg, Germany, May 2018.

relations were described as “coming together,” “integration,” “seeing the vulnerability of others,” and “showing yourself.” These experiences were often directly followed by questions about one’s place in the group—about inevitable self-responsibility and limits of intersubjective communication. This “distanced togetherness” seems to be remarkable in comparison to the vague “us” that is often heard in closing circles of mainstream festivals.

The difficulty of balancing consensus and disagreement was one of the biggest surprises during the symposium, leading to the question of whether the queer movement is intrinsically inclusive or not.

### **Queer CI space: unfolding core values of CI**

When creating a queer CI event, we face the question of whether this is a CI space for queers or a queer perspective on CI. The second option is more interesting to us, yet we think the first one must be encouraged to get into the second one. In a dance space ruled by patriarchal heteronormative norms, the interactions that can happen are limited by its implicit rules, which dominate the space. A queer perspective on CI is about freeing the space from this kind of maybe unconscious, or at least unsaid, implicit or inexplicit control. Although at the moment we are not able to say exactly what the core of our queer dancing is, it nonetheless seems to have a magnetic effect that brings together practitioners from very different communities and from outside the community of queer activists.

From a political perspective, there’s a common core of queer values and CI values: horizontality, equality, breaking the patterns, building up a different kind of interpersonal space, proactivity, and so on. At the same time, CI seems to be a mirror of society and may unintentionally and subconsciously reproduce inequality, anachronistic patterns, and social conventions through bodily interactions. In this sense, an alliance of CI and queer approaches may strengthen their shared core.

For now, we understand that the queer approach to CI implies balance between bodily experience and discourse. To be queer is one of the possible ways to feel and to say “I am different.” This statement is the beginning of a discourse on otherness that is rooted in the experience of one’s own gendered body and bodily desire. This discourse is grounded in the habit of naming the smallest private sensations that may feel irrelevant but which add up to one’s bodily sense of existence and underlie subjective identity and orientation. A queer perspective makes this explicit and necessary in order to gain social visibility and legitimacy. When CI is practiced in a cis-heterosexual environment, those kinds of sensations are easily skipped because the heteropatriarchal norm tends to try to make itself invisible. Subtle sexual expressions and sensations like “I feel you inside me already when I step in your peri-personal space” might not be well received in a heteronormative practice of CI. In contrast, “I feel your floor through our common bodily structure” is a more neutral way of describing an intimate encounter, washed of any kind of voluptuous sensations or feelings and thus acceptable.



Participants of the Queer Contact Improvisation (QCI) festival during the workshop *Queering Gaze and Space*, with teacher Wiktor Skrzypczak [far right]; Hamburg, Germany, May 2018.

Making present what is cataloged as “intimate” or “private,” “against the flow,” or “conflictive” in the CI dance space can contribute to making visible the cis-heteropatriarchal norm. Clearly, practice is the source of knowledge. This process of queering CI is in its early stages and needs practice to unfold its insights and discourse, advancing from queerness as identity politics to queerness as a quality of somatic interaction.

### Knowledge: the language of flesh

In the 20th century, somatic practices were systematized within a rational framework as body knowledge. Those who systematized them—largely under the influence of Buddhism and New Age thinking—were gathering knowledge from other parts of the globe because they were questioning Western cultural standards of knowledge and finding them inadequate for describing somatic experience. There is also the discussion around exoticism and whether somatics contains a certain amount of “whitened orientalism” and cultural appropriation.

In any case, CI adds an artistic and a horizontal communicational approach to somatics, which can be of high interest for queer, feminist, anti-racist, anti-ableist, animalist, and other political movements. Post-humanist political movements, somatics being part of them, can help shape a whole new approach to human life and our future development on planet Earth.

All of these means are looking for a balance between feeling free to be empathetic and feeling free to express disagreement and, by doing so, are widening the possible interactions in dance and queer spaces. This could lead to peaceful experiences of conflict and diverse and playful experiences of consensus. Political queer activism and CI

skills around communication encourage the capacity to live in disruption and disagreement with resilience, stability, and the ability to fall without breaking ourselves down. We train ourselves in the complex language of flesh—an enriching process integrating the work of democratization toward deep freedom.

### Consent: developing a queer political perspective on CI from a critique of consent

One of the failed assumptions about these QCI events was that sexually intense dances would take place. We wonder if this absence of sexual intensity could be related to the heightened awareness that queer activists have about the practice of consent.

Of course, a queer space is not freed of the possibility of sexual assault, but generally our understanding of consent comes from the idea of how it developed for straight spaces. A queer and somatic critique of consent could change how we approach consent when we are not in a heteronormative situation. The heteronormative idea of consent comes from a backdrop of unequal power relations and verbally based frameworks. In CI, there is the possibility of preverbal consensus beyond words.

There are inherent problems with an embodied (non-verbal) perspective of consent: what is it to *believe* that you are empathizing with another person versus *actually* empathizing with the other person? When approaching consent, there’s always some insecurity that threatens the safe space as a whole. However, what we know within the political queer movement is that at some point we have to trust in order to be able to escape from this circularity, to be able to let go of that feeling of generalized suspicion that abuse could happen—that I cannot know another’s feelings about my touch. Releasing from that feeling of suspicion implies a commitment to the responsibility of thinking, speaking, dancing, and practicing how to build trust by disassembling relationships of domination and submission between the participants. We think building trust is something very, very queer. From a queer contact improvisation perspective, this is an ambition the whole CI community should pursue and practice.

## Preliminary suggestions for facilitation of queer CI events

What have we learned from QCI 2018 that we can take forward into the facilitation of future queer dance events?

1. Be open for the unexpected. Expect disagreement. The outcome of both events turned out to differ from facilitators' plans. During the symposium, we experienced reluctance toward objectifying research and toward the effort of consistent documentation. The festival also had disruptive vitality alongside affirmation. This shows a need for new formulas of dance meetings.
2. Create *braver* spaces, which can be shared by people with different openness to challenges and where physical, sensory, and emotional risks can be taken, in addition to *safer* spaces, free from sexual and social abuse or harassment.
3. Independent dance practice, research, facilitation, and healing are different roles, which are difficult to handle simultaneously by one or two persons. Delegate them to a broader team and to the whole community.
4. Use the venue to support your group process. Besides the main place for gathering as a community, you may need
  - places for gathering in subgroups;
  - a protected place for healing;
  - a place for being alone;
  - accessibility for everyone.
5. Use the work session time according to participants' bodily and mental resources:
  - start each activity with movement;
  - balance speaking, moving, and resting time;
  - don't wait until the evening for precious improvisation time; people might be too tired.
6. Determine the balance between moving and talking by the choice of prompts for the activity:
  - text for discursive exchange and research;
  - movement or performance for embodied exchange and research.
7. Take your time with big questions; focus on small ones.
8. Reduce the external input from teachers.
9. Keep the leading question of the meeting specific and sharp. It will get bigger and more complex nevertheless.
10. Offer additional introduction, including gender-neutral language and preferred pronouns.
11. If you are determined to use specific work formats or documentation and research methods, inform the participants about it beforehand in the description of the event, and be consistent. People are surprisingly thankful for reliable frameworks.
12. Have methods workshops. Sometimes *how* you do the thing is more important than the thing itself. Develop new, embodied methods.
13. Observe when the movement evokes meaning and when the meaning moves. Blend verbal and corporeal practices. Stay at the edge of implicit and explicit communication. Work out new, performative ways of knowing and relating; write down your method; share it; and test it.



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### **To contact the authors:**

**Aramo Olaya**, [olaya.aramo@gmail.com](mailto:olaya.aramo@gmail.com),  
<https://congresofilosofiadeladanza.com/>;

**Wiktor Skrzypczak**, [queer.contact.impro@gmail.com](mailto:queer.contact.impro@gmail.com),  
<http://queer-contact-impro.org>, [facebook.com/queer.contact.impro](https://www.facebook.com/queer.contact.impro)

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Participants of the QCI symposium during the workshop Beyond Consent, with teacher Aramo Olaya; Hamburg, Germany, May 2018.