

Sexual fantasies on the dance floor: Sensoriality between strangers in Contact Improvisation

Introduction

Currently undertaking a transcultural multi-sited ethnography on the production of intimacies in dance, I've been investigating the articulation between intimacy, sexuality and erotism in Contemporary Dance and Contact improvisation (for now in Montreal, this autumn in Paris, and hopefully next winter in Dakar - Senegal).

In April 2019, I arrived in Montreal to run my fieldwork and work with the research team of artist and philosopher Erin Manning (SenseLab, Concordia University). Already involved within dance communities in Switzerland for previous fieldwork, I've always been fascinated by the physical proximity between bodies in dance, the freedom dancers have in touching each other, and undressing in front of each other. At the beginning of my own dance training, I was myself challenged, pushed beyond my own intimate boundaries (bodily closeness, nakedness).

I will never forget my first contact improvisation duet. I was 25 years old, rolling on the floor on a man who could have been my father. While our bodies were totally intertwined, I was asking myself when we share such a sensoriality with people from another sex and another generation. Through my dance practice, I learned to redefine my limits of intimacy, dissociating touch from eroticism and sexuality, and differentiating physical intimacy from emotional intimacy. Therefore, my current understanding of intimacy is disconnected from love and sexuality. Rather, it is a bodily pleasure of touching and dancing with another dancer. Through my own apprenticeship, my own experience and conception of intimacy has changed. Never ever could I have imagined dancing naked with 25 years old, while it wasn't an issue 10 years later. I realised the flexibility of intimate boundaries and how they can always extend.

In this paper, I will present the kind of touch involved in contact improvisation and its association with eroticism. Since contact provides a space for sharing an intimate sensoriality between strangers through touch, I will argue that contact allows people to play out their sexual fantasies. This will bring us to my main argument that dance floors fulfill the need of intimacy for singles who reject the dominant form of monogamy and search for alternatives of love, sexuality and relationships.

The practice of Contact Improvisation

When a newcomer attends his first jam, he might think that contact is mainly about touch and caress. He sees dancers sitting on the floor, eyes closed, breathing and touching each other skin with back/forearm in slow motion. Nevertheless, according to contact teachers', touch is

not the first aim of the dance, although it appears to be the more apparent sign. In fact, contact is first meant to be a dialogue of weight transfer.

Dancer and Anthropologist Cynthia Novack acknowledges the intimacy of contact improvisation as a 'sincere and intimate dialogue of two people.' Contact evokes 'images of comradeship, play, nurturing, sport, sex, and love' (Novack 1990: 141), including 'actions which resemble love-making' (Novack 1990: 163). The 'gland game' is the expression used by Steve Paxton – the founder of the dance practice in the 1970's in New York- to refer to the sexual dimension of contact. According to Paxton, the gland game (the focus on sexual energy) should be overcome in the dance (Novack, 1990: 165). In a sense, the limits to sexuality are strictly defined as there are no kiss or nakedness. However, the proximity between dancers, such as rolling on another body on the floor eyes closed, the slow rhythm of the dance, the soft skin contact, the loud expression of breathing and sounds are all actions that might trigger sexual imagination. The dance allows hugging, massaging and cradling, which might be an open door to the realm of eroticism.

Cynthia Novack feels 'a strong sense of communion' (Novack, 1990: 152) and a 'sensual involvement' in her dances' (Novack, 1990: 158). She recognizes that 'the sexual ambiguity inherent in the structure of contact improvisation affects practitioners as well as viewers' (Novack, 1990: 164). But usually, dancers often argue for sensuality rather than sexuality (Novack, 1990: 170).

There is a strong shared opinion within Contact communities, that it is not about jeopardize sexual feelings. The problem is how to respond to sexual energy when it arises. Dancers ask 'what do you do with the feelings that are generated by the touching and that you can't exactly turn off when you walk out the door?' (Davida 1997: 4). Or: 'it's not about living emotion or sensation or eroticism in the dancing, but in fact empowering it in a very different way' (Davida 1997: 6). Following the crisis of New York Community - already 15 years ago - 'there was no desire to thrust sexuality out of contact. There was a strong voice that said that sexuality had a place in contact just as it had a place in being human' (Davida 1997: 12). Dancers concluded that 'the issue is not the existence of sexuality, but whether/how/when it is expressed. The issue is consent' (Yardley 2017: 3). Consent is an important notion in the core of the practice.

Although there is a divergence between discourses claiming contact improvisation as *nonsexual*, and discourses emphasizing on the sexuality of contact, dancers would probably agree that contact is not primary a place for sexual dating/meeting such as bars and clubs. All dancers I talked to "officially" joined the contact community animated by their interest in the dance technique, focusing on learning/developing/increasing their dancing skills. Dancers are not closed to erotic encounters if they happen. I often heard: 'it's nice if it happens but this is not the reason why I'm here.'

Montreal also made me aware of sexual violence on the dance floor. There is even a blog on consent culture on which dancers relate experiences of sexual harassment.¹ When I started reading the testimonies I couldn't believe it, wondering how I could have been blind all these years, not being conscious of the violence happening on the dance floor. My naïve understanding of touch as a generous 'act of sharing' (Manning 2006: 13), drawing on good intentions, was suddenly shaken. I've always clearly differentiated contact from eroticism. The distinction between touch in dance and touch in sexuality had always been so clear to me, and the dance floor *not* a place for sexual touch and feelings, that I was wondering why my experience was different from the testimonies I was reading.

Then, there are other spaces that offer a clear cross-boundaries, going beyond the edge of contact. In Montreal, I discovered the *Cozy practice* (which is apparently also spreading through Europe), which consist of romantic collective evenings of sensorial bath and massage, and *Touch&Play* which explicitly and consciously flirt with sexuality.

Cozy evenings

Following a misunderstanding with one of my contact dance colleagues, I ended up in a *Cozy event*. He invited me on Facebook, mentioning it was a private evening (only on invitation), called *Cozy Water and Massage*. The notice announced a swimming pool and asked to bring a towel. Since the contact community in Bern organizes contact jam with naked sauna, I naively thought it was something similar. But when I arrived at his place, I realized that the evening was not about dancing, but massaging each other in a strong sensual atmosphere. We spent most of the evening in a swimming pool, half naked, offering each other massages and gentle caress. Half of the people attending the cozy were also contact improvisation dancers, and the others mostly people from the massage community (and I was the youngest).

Touch&Play

<https://touchandplay.org/>

Intimacy

At this point of the reflection, we may wonder what constitutes an experience of intimacy. At which physical proximity does intimacy begin between bodies? Bodily closeness - as touching, caressing, cuddling, sweating, dancing naked - generates a particular (inter)subjective intimate experience. Dancers recognize the specific sense of intimacy produced by contact, creating other boundaries than the ones of daily life.

¹ The blog was launched in 2017 by the leader of the Wednesday jam in Toronto, Kathleen Rea: <https://contactimprovconsentculture.com/> (accessed 26/02/2020).

Through fieldwork, I realized the variety of intimacy: physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, spiritual intimacy, intellectual intimacy. I realized that within the practice of contact, there were different strategies to set boundaries with others, in order to diminish the emotional connection generated by the physical proximity: “taboo” of gaze, taboo of certain body parts (genitals, head, hairs,) a specific quality of touch, physicality (lifts and quickness). Moreover, the importance of decoding the intention of the dance partner, why (s)he is dancing.²

The perception of what may be considered as intimacy changes between (sub-)cultures and transforms over time. In his analysis of sexuality, love and erotism, Anthony Giddens explained how the sense of intimacy changed in ‘modern societies’ during the twenty century (Giddens 1992: 11). Intimacy is not a pre-constituted phenomenon but occurs under specific circumstances. Therefore, it can be understood as a set of sensory-relational experiences unfolding from individual, social and nonhuman horizons, and increasing through the quality, depth and intensity of relations. Intimacy is a phenomenon dependent on subjective bodily experiences and the social. Although intimate feelings belong to subjectivity, the experience of what is perceived as intimate remains social, historical and cultural predetermined.

The dance floor as sexual metaphor

In contact improvisation, a lot of dancers between 25 and 45 years old are single, in short terms or open relationships. I asked myself whether this kind of community was particularly attracting single people, or whether it was generating a model based on freedom and single life. Does contact encourage people to remain free of relationships? Lee, an American contact dancer wrote:

I have found that CI jams often attract people who crave human touch, or are lacking it. Some jams have rules or statements, such as “this is not a place to pick up a date”. I have often experienced sexual desire, or felt it from someone else. Most of the time, it is a confused feeling. Be aware, be awake. In doing this you can define your own boundaries, finding the dance. I would not expect this skill from a beginner.

(Walder 2014)

Here, Lee points out the ambiguity between dance and sexuality. Michel Dorais explains how eroticism results from an active process: a situation (not necessarily erotic *per se*) is consciously perceived to trigger sexual arousal (Dorais 2010: 11). According to Dorais, eroticism is generated by an act of transformation in which a sensual/sexual feature is given to a person, a context, a gesture, an attitude. The sociologist adds that eroticism is entangled

² Touch can happen anywhere as long as it is to support. A hand placed on the torso or very close to genitals wouldn't be judged inappropriate if it happens “coincidentally” for a lift.

with imagination and fantasy (Dorais 2010: 10). So the question is not whether dance is erotic or not, but how one creates the conditions to see it as erotic, allowing sexual feelings to arise.

Particularly within the Contact Improvisation scene, practitioners develop physical intimacies with people from different generations, genders and cultures, flirting with the boundaries of sexuality. People join the contact community animated by various feelings and respond to sexual arousal in heterogeneous ways. Sometimes, dance floor romances extend to daily life and turn into (temporal) love affairs or even stable relationships. Love and sexual relationships *do* enact on the dance floor, although it was not the objective of the founders (transition from a professional practice to a non professional one). Kinga (from Montreal) confessed:

I recognize that I am speaking from a privileged position of a person who is young, conventionally attractive, experienced dancer and has a lot of physical contact in her life outside of CI. I can imagine that for people who don't have that, CI may seem like a good doorway to sexual intimacy that they're lacking in life.

(Yardley 2017: 10-11)

During fieldwork, I noticed how contact improvisation functions as a dating platform. It is a place where dancers have the chance to meet other people with similar interests. It is a place that attracts singles who prefer to remain on their own than to commit into a routinized relationship. Since they also need intimacy, contact improvisation provides an "indirect" dating place, a sensorial space in which singles can fulfill their longing for another human presence (and this is particular the case for older dancers with reduced opportunities of meeting new people).

In big cities like Montreal and Paris (compared to provincial towns), there are more people who consciously choose to remain on their own, claiming for their freedom and independency, rejecting sexual exclusivity. They can make decisions for themselves, without needing to compromise with another life. But as they also need physical intimacy, contact provides a place to fulfill this human need of touch and caress. In their conception, temporary bodily pleasures become more important than commitment into a routinized relationship, and there is a strong desire to explore sexuality and sensorial desire with various partners. Philosopher Alain de Botton explained how our modern conception of love has inherited from the romanticism from 18th century literature (De Botton 2016): the sudden dramatic encounter between 2 persons, under specific circumstances, as love at first sight.

A last feature of the dance floor is the fantasy of forbidden relationships. Sexuality is regulated by social conventions in terms of age, gender and exogamy. Although categories have been disputed/ deconstructed, and limits always pushed away to allow more combinations, there are still social taboos toward unconventional practices. In a certain way, the dance floor allows sensuous encounters beyond categories of gender, culture and generation. Contact

practitioners develop physical intimacies with people they couldn't even imagine having a daily relationship or sexual intercourse with (because of the way education shapes erotic feelings and sexuality). In my opinion, the dance floor is a libidinal catharsis, which functions as a metaphor in which people can "play" out their sexual fantasies.

To conclude...

The dance floor is a space with blurry boundaries between a dance caress and an erotic one. It is a space to experience relationships differently from conventional models. Contact, Cozy evenings and Touch&Play show a diversification of ways of relating with others: the possibility of physical connections with strangers, extending the number of people to be intimate with. Intimacy is redefined beyond the classical private/public dichotomy (with an experience of intimacy reduced to home relationships). These practices underline the oscillation of the contemporary subjectivity between autonomy and connectivity: a fear of alienation (claim of independency), simultaneously a neediness for intimacy (Marar 2012: 6).

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