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Part of panel: **Contact Improvisation and Somatics as Confrontation**

With Dr Nita Little, Dr Defne Erdur, Dr Malaika Sarco-Thomas

Full paper text:

The Materiality of Conflict in Contact: Improvisational Explorations in 'Pitch'

This paper reflects on the film *Pitch* which can be viewed here:

<https://filmfreeway.com/project/1361791>

Password: materiality

Good afternoon. My presentation deals with somatics as a form of confrontation through an analysis of the creative dance film project *Pitch* (2017).

Pitch is a 9-minute dance film, in which eight movers negotiate each other's bodies on a dusty playing field. Haunted by a gritty soundscape of breath, dust, falling bodies, and football players, the video documents a research process that began in July 2017 by gathering a group of contact improvisation (CI) practitioners together to investigate **conflict** in and through CI practice.

You can catch the full film in the screenings taking place as part of the 'Positioning Screen Dance' event from 3.30pm Sunday at Palazzo Pereira, which is also when the contact improvisation jam is taking place.

Prompted by the call for proposals for this conference, but also by very real events in our lives—the crisis in Syria and repercussions across Europe, Brexit, personal experiences of clashes in professional life, we gathered under the direction of choreographer Charlie Morrissey to see what we might discover about conflict from a seven-day process of investigation.

As the project coordinator, I invited movers who were experienced in the practice of contact improvisation, to collaborate under Charlie's direction in order to discover something about resistance, and touch, which could be shared in a film. We invited videographer and visual artist Rafael Mielczarek to work with us in the creation of this video, but ultimately we improvised our way, as we realised that our process was not necessarily storyboard-able, and that ultimately we needed to find a route toward framing our work that was suitable for film. Through the process Richard Sarco-Thomas became director of cinematography, and editing; he guided Rafael in framing the shots, and considering the proximity of the lens during filming.

In this presentation, I will show parts of the film, discussing how it offers an insight into ways that contemporary contact improvisers are thinking through performance, in order to argue that the CI practices that inform such art-making also align with radical proposals for reconfiguring human identity. Karen Barad's assertion that matter is animate, and configured through a mutual attention on the intra-activity between humans and/as material, informs this argument.

Originally, the brief for this project, called 'the Conflict in Contact' was quite open. Our resources included the theme of conflict, videography, a group of movers, a week of rehearsals, our CI skills, and a chosen site of a football stadium in Msida, Malta, in July.

When we sat to gather our ideas to get a sense of the territory we were working in, questions we brought to the process included:

What are common conflicts in the practice of contact improvisation? Beyond the clashes observable in CI culture between the hippies (go with the flow, touch & play, body love) and the CI purists (research-focused exploration) we were interested in conflicts inherent in the principles, e.g.:

- how we perceive and what we perceive
- up and down
- tension and relaxation

We asked, how can conflict be explored **in and through** the practice of CI?

Charlie guided our conversation toward materiality, articulating his interests, and asking:

'What is the material, the actual **stuff** of conflict?'

Asking 'how can we experience this, and then compose with it?', we arrived together eventually at a film which captures scenes from our explorations. It starts with a wider view of individual bodies manipulating other individual bodies in a geometric landscape, and moves in to record our explorations in close up shots of bodily detail and blurry movers. The

footage was edited with an eye toward giving a close, involved, experience of bodies in motion, in contact, and in tension and conflict.

[see first two clips of *Pitch*, 2.21-2.32 and 6.37-7.10]

The film created offers a documented exploration of materiality, which also considers the camera as first a voyeur, and then a participant in the activity, leading the viewer toward a more intimate involvement with the dancers' bodies, following their **experience** through close proximity.

As a dancer, Morrissey's teaching has inspired me tremendously in my study of movement and performance. His rigorous and joyful enquiry into **experiencing mass** through moving has prompted me, as curator and co-organiser, to make his teaching a mainstay in nearly a dozen events (festivals, workshops, performance projects, and conferences) produced by Contact Festival Dartington since 2010. Choosing him for this project was also an effort to enquire further into a way of operating with a direct lineage to Steve Paxton, with whom Charlie has a working relationship.

Rather than presenting, showing, or performing, Morrissey emphasises the research element of enquiry through touch, asking:

How to stay in that place of inquiry—not to demonstrate or portray something, but instead to be in the activity of being and doing ... and the more we can stay inside of something rather than being outside of it... It was a way of looking at something and saying: that's what's happening and how is it happening? (Morrissey 2017)

We started with a simple premise of exploring 'what is happening' through resistance. In partners, we engaged with 'sensing as a muscular activity', asking 'what is the stuff of encounter?' through touch duets. These were a focused exploration on the mass and minutiae of anatomy as experience through mutual resistance: two opposing forces finding friction in skin, fascia, muscle, bone, structure, centre and periphery. From duets this became a group exploration, where one person in the middle of a web of resistance explores the potential of exceeding himself, and the group, through *feeling through the sensational effects of frictive opposition*. Here is a clip of this score.

[see third clip of *Pitch*, 4.14-4.32]

While the bodies resist one another, there is also an intensely focused sensing activity going on—active listening while doing. Through the score, and through the film, we (both movers and viewers) are constantly asking: 'What is the stuff of encounter?'

The exercise reminded us of the explorations shown in early CI work, such as those in the film *Soft Pallet*. As dancer Dorte Bjerre Jensen pointed out, ‘There’s no fancy stuff there, just people bumping into one another over and over’ (2017). Each time this encounter is different, yet this material is made from the repeated seeking, launching, crashing, rebounding, recovering. These repeated rough bumpy encounters are the substance, the *stuff*, of the dance. The unaffected mass and momentum of the moving bodies is foregrounded in the film, not smoothed or sanitized, yet, the dancers continually seek engagement with one another—they are magnetized as they seek out meeting—and confrontation.

[play *Soft Pallet* clip 1:26-2.00]

These ungoverned encounters of touch and conflict are fundamental to the premise of CI as a research activity—an active enquiry and experiment in engaging with another body, rather than a reproduction or representation of patterns.

So, how is such work confrontational? It can be argued that CI is not.

The values behind both practicing modern and postmodern dance are often linked to themes of the emancipation of the body, flow, continuity and, in Andre Lepecki’s words, ‘being-towards-movement’, or a state in which the body becomes available for both self-expression and autonomy (Cvejic 2015: 35). Such values have been critiqued in light of the ideological flexibility they imply, with correlations being made from the pleasure-seeking ‘liberation’ of Gaga dance and the ‘go with the flow’ mantras of some folk practices of contact improvisation to the expansionist and neoliberal policies of the US and Israel. See for example Edo Feder and Shir Hacham’s development of this argument in ‘A Dancing Body Offers Legitimacy to the State’ (2015).

However, CI founder Steve Paxton emphasises the ‘non-wimpy way’ that dancers need to engage in struggle in order to practice. Drawing on principles from the Japanese martial art aikido, which influenced Paxton significantly in his development of CI, Paxton explains that not presenting oneself as a victim is a primary principle in injury prevention (Paxton in Cvejic 2014: 43)—a principle of working somatically and sensitively, as an intelligent mover. As Cvejic points out, Paxton’s subsequent definition of CI as a study of the a de-socialised ‘animal body’, in its engagement with Newtonian physics, necessitates a kind of negation of social and historical identities in order to tune in to the body itself:

Paxton’s words:

I stress that the dancers are people not in the social sense but in the animal sense in this kind of dancing, that they should not smile, should not make eye contact, should not talk, that they should just be there as animals, as bundles of nerves, as masses

and bones... touching the other bundle and letting that be the work (Paxton 2004 in Cvejic 2015).

In her article 'War Dance', Cvejic however questions the political immunity and isolationism implied by such practice, as well as the living-on-a-farm-away-from-it-all lifestyle adopted by Paxton and other key CI founders, arguing that although CI focuses on the elongation and responsiveness of the physical spine in practice it also seeks to negate intellect, political ideas, passions in the name of the work, resulting in:

'the private spineless life of a subject who is immune, indifferent, or powerless in the face of politics outside of her/his own immunised community—in a non-wimpy way, perhaps, but still a wimp' (Cvejic 2014: 45).

There is a contention that the de-identification of the body from its socio-political context through the work with mass is itself a non-standpoint, and thus by default 'wimpy'.

I would like to counter this, however, with the suggestion that the project of seeking to feel into the body of another with both force and curiosity is in fact a bold and politicised move, moving away from identification with 'the human' components of the self. Such work coaxes attention away from social identity and toward an experience of materiality which encompasses 'stuff' as a common factor, and inquires into the possibility of movement within and between masses, as a rigorous meditation on encounter. Friction is an essential part of this encounter; the practice proposed by Charlie is to feel through the 'stuff' of this resistance, to enquire 'what is there'. In doing so, the activity of contact in conflict maintains a curious, questioning stance toward a changing reality, and tracks this together in a changing environment. Attention and physical curiosity is the confrontational practice.

As Charlie Morrissey said: **It's a massive thing, to feel this other body.**

At its core, CI practice is about **feeling another body**-- and as Morrissey infers, that's massive. It's massive in its intimacy—to feel through the layers of warmth, hair, skin, fascia, muscle, bone, marrow, centre, and floor—but also in its tuning to mass as a focus, its attention to physicality as a force beyond identity. It is also a radical practice, to notice what is here, to bring attention to what is happening in another body as connected to one's own body, noting the tension and strain, and asking whether that is what we want to be creating.

Noticing might be recognised as the primary step of somatic practice. *How* we notice can be said to constitute a primary fact of identity.

Can a practice of noticing be radical activism?

Karen Barad's new materialist writing looks at how philosophical and scientific practices have upheld representationalism through their assumptions, and proposes that a **performative understanding of matter**, as material, can shake up of how we understand our world, ourselves, and our relationships. Building on Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs and companion species, Barad questions how notions of ourselves and our boundaries as 'human' or 'nonhuman' are stabilised—and questioned—through performativity.

She notes that:

If performativity is linked not only to the formation of the subject but also to the production of the matter of bodies, as Butler's account of "materialization" and Haraway's notion of "materialized refiguration" suggest, then it is all the more important that we understand the nature of this production. (Barad 2003: 808)

Barad champions the fight against 'thingification' through definitions, proposing that the tyranny of 'the the' (Brown 2010) can be resisted through agential realism, a practice that notices the ways that we enquire into matter, language, and relationships, while recognising the influence of the apparatuses we use to measure such entities.

She proposes that:

On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role "we" play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (Barad 2003: 812)

There are several ways in which *Pitch* and the somatic work it documents, can be seen as a testament to notions of conflict, by seeking to enquire into the intertwined practices of **knowing and becoming**. I will summarise these points, which have been hinted at.

- 1) Conflict / resistance as material, explored through:
 - a. Partnering struggle at the start
 - b. Exploration of resistance in group as affecting / supporting
- 2) Intimacy of touch as reading / noticing / seeing / enquiring, explored through:
 - a. Filmic closeups, fascination with detail
 - b. Documenting sensing: breath, skin, impact of gravel
- 3) Impact with the other: dealing with mass, explored through:
 - a. Falling to the ground
 - b. Launching / jumping and catching: asking how we deal with the full weight of another
- 4) Site and references to society, explored through:
 - a. The soundscape: football inferences

- b. Disaster imagery: desert / the middle east / dust / bombing / Syria

To conclude, and to further link this process to conflict:

The founder of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba said, 'Warriorship is none other than the vitality that sustains all life'. The film *Pitch* documents contact improvisers as readied warriors dealing with one another's moving, changing, masses with a vital and ongoing sense of curiosity. The becoming is not defined, but the struggle is present. As a practice in exchanging identification for a gritty, sweaty, dusty experience of materiality, the film shows us blurred bodies of resistance as contingent – codependent, but wholly involved.

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Password: materiality

Biography

Malaika Sarco-Thomas is a dance artist and scholar researching the potential of improvisation technologies to facilitate developments in environmental perception. She has worked with dancers and community groups in China, Poland, Swaziland and Malta to develop site-specific choreography and film projects. An account of her work in China is detailed in the *Journal of Arts and Communities* issue 1.1 titled 'Improvising in Ruyang, Community Art as Ecological Practice' (2011). In 2017 she produced the site-specific dance film *_Pitch_* which can be viewed at <https://filmfreeway.com/project/1361791> Password: materiality. *Pitch* was presented at the event *Screendance Landscapes* in Venice in 2018.

Recently Malaika co-organised the Dance Studies Association's 2018 conference in Valletta, Malta on the topic of 'Contra: Dance & Conflict' and co-edited the book *Interdisciplinarity in the Performing Arts: Contemporary Perspectives* with Stefan Aquilina, available through the Malta University Press. She is currently editing a forthcoming volume on *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation: Artistic, Scientific, and Philosophical Perspectives*.

Malaika lectures in Dance at the University of Chester's Department of Performing Arts. Previously she was Senior Lecturer and Head of Department of Dance Studies at the University of Malta, and Course Coordinator for BA Dance & Choreography at Falmouth University incorporating Dartington College of Arts in the UK. Since 2011 she has co-organized Contact Festival Dartington and Conference, an annual platform for exchange in practices of contact and improvisation, with Richard Sarco-Thomas.

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Panel title: **Contact Improvisation and Somatics as Confrontation**

Dr Nita Little, Dr Defne Erdur, Dr Malaika Sarco-Thomas

Panel Rationale:

Building on recent developments in discourses within the field of somatics which posits somatic practices and performance cultures as practices of critique (Bath Spa University Conference 2017), this panel addresses the theme of confrontation through a series of presentations aimed to develop the discussion around conflict through examples in contact improvisation and somatic practices. Addressing the contention that somatics as self-enquiry, and contact improvisation as a social dance form and a technical practice tends to avoid cultural conflicts in favour of indulgent, feel-good rhetoric, this panel considers emerging and historical somatic practices of addressing conflict and restriction by drawing on key principles of body-based practices to examine contemporary issues of communication, and encountering difference within dance studies.

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Abstract

The Materiality of Conflict in Contact: Improvisational Explorations in 'Pitch'

Malaika Sarco-Thomas

Keywords: contact improvisation, film, new materialism

This presentation investigates the 2017 site-based dance film project *Pitch*, featuring choreography by Charlie Morrissey, as an investigation into the materiality of conflict within contact improvisation practices. New materialist philosophies invite reconsideration of matter as animate in ways which dance improvisers might be said to already perceive the body. Deborah Hay's knowledgeable cells, and Steve Paxton's animal body can arguably be read in light of Karen Barad's notion of posthumanist 'iterative intra-activity' in which the consideration of the differentiated mass of the body as nonhuman becomes another kind of choreographic agent within the performance.

Working processes within the project, which included focusing on the tactility of conflict as friction and the consideration of resistance itself as a material, placed emphasis on the dancers' material experience of the body as a key performative strategy. In this sense, matter became figured, in the words of Barad, not 'as a mere effect or product of discursive practices, but rather as an agentic factor in its iterative materialization' (2012: 32) in which the identity of the dancers became 'radically reworked'. From an analysis of the choreographic process and film product, this presentation will investigate how contact improvisation practices which focus on the tactile experience of matter can be said to be

examples of iterative intra-activity on multiple perceptual levels. Tactile confrontation of 'the other' and his/her struggle toward aliveness in movement, and confrontation of the porous materiality of the human body become hallmarks of the film.

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