

Contact-Improvisation: a training against fear?

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What do you have to say today to so many CI teachers? I do not know.
CI does not answer. It asks a lot of questions.
It does not teach me how to answer, but to know how to ask questions
in the right direction
that is to say the opposite direction of common sense
that is to say, the other sense - beyond top and bottom, I and you, and all the dialectics of
master and pupil.

What is your place in CI?

I do not know. Lateral maybe. Orthogonal sometimes.
I do not know, but I can say what the place of CI is in me.
Some make CI a moment on their path, a passage to cross and to leave behind. For me, it is a
continuous source - that is to say, a source that continues to touch me, to question me, to
feed me.
Among the practices that we choose and return to everyday, CI is THE most central practice
for me, because it is the most transformative. The one with the biggest potential for self-
transformation.

What are you trying to say?

Someone wrote: "We change metaphysics only by changing practices" (Baptiste Morizot).
And there is in the practice of CI something that awakens, shapes and sediments new
ontologies: other ways to be with, to live in other bodies, to be colonized by other gestures, to
be a pack, to become-matter, to decenter oneself from one's egotistical position, or on the
contrary to subjectivise oneself. To be plural.

Why do you ask the questions and answer them yourself?

This is perhaps another feature of the practice. Another way in which we learn to build up
our faculties of self-observation. By dint of folding around myself like a torchlight scanning
through the dark, of stalking micro-vibrations of sensibility, of observing my usual paths to
make them change tracks, something is born that talks to me. An inner voice that
adventurers of the inside know, one we find in experimental movement practices-- the ones I
love: CI and poetry. Paxton puts it this way: « I was spying on myself. Self-hacking. ». No
different from the poet Henri Michaux who has sought throughout his life to "become his
own spy".

The voice is born of this fold: body looking at body, activity turning on itself. I am this fold:
the distance from "I" to "Thou", neither of them, a differential
Which allows me: I dialogue with myself.

From there, two things appear to me: a modus operandi and a topic.

1. A modus operandi

First, a proposition of listening: can you activate within you your own vigilance - this
inner witness, this voice which is not a turn of head (leave your brain quiet, the poor
dear, it already has enough folds), but a turn of the body folding on itself?
(you are experts in counter-espionage)

Can you listen to my outer voice with your inner voice, observing segments of more or less strong resonances? Where it gets stuck? where it flows? where it heats with opposition? Or it affects you?

I am a voice - a layering of badly said words - that has no importance, except that of awakening yours. Listen to yours under mine.

Each one's strategy: sitting, lying, standing, moving or still, eyes open or closed, near or far, hidden or exposed – organize yourself so that your listening voice is both the most open and the most critical, the most demanding and the least disturbed possible.

2. A topic

What to say?

Flexion, re-flexion.

This inner voice is a barrier against reflexes, automatisms, habits and what seems self-evident. It requires an effort: it requires going to see behind, in the finest granularity of experience, where experience is discovered in its equivocality, in its perplexity, in its complexity.

This reflexive machine that we learn to sharpen - by spying on ourselves – removes judgments and comments de facto. It goes to the bone of experience, right to its opacity. It tracks what we do not know, what we do not understand. It shows us the difficulty—the primary one, perhaps: the fear of seeing in the dark, while it is so simple to dance with flexions, and without any re-flexion.

Fear and the unknown are intrinsically linked in us.

I would like to submit to your inner voices, to their silent concert, the hypothesis that the practice of CI is a training against fear. More to the point: the assumption that teaching CI is a radical and effective way to arm against fear.

This prism is a proposal to read what we do, which concerns me these days for several reasons: fear is rarely discussed head-on. It is paradoxically shut up, even though it is basically the fuel of our practice, what our practice aims to transform - into forces of trust. It is shut up, even though it is the feeling that grows best nowadays on different contemporary grounds, even though it is the symptom of our times, and it is the place where we know something, where we can do & act.

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I'm looking at myself. I'm looking at ourselves. We live cotton days, light with kindness, sunny with mutual trust, driven by the joy of practicing together and the promise of beautiful dances to live, to see live. That's as sweet as an island.

In a few days, more than two hundred dancers will find us. Some inexperienced. Some, under the mimetic hat of their smile, will be absolutely terrified.

On our island of forgetting.

We can be deluded by the fault of what we have learnt: dance with disarming ease and no longer feel where our gestures come from.

Funny teachers we are.

What is teaching?

What do you do when you teach?

How are you suspicious of yourself?

I remember. I make an effort to remember my ignorant body, to use empathy to enter the bodies that surround me, to let myself be colonized by other powers to act, to activate in me the resistance forces of beginner gestures, to emulate in my own flesh the bodies of shyness, clumsiness, rigidity that I see and touch.

My luck regarding this point: my observatory (my tactilatory?). I have been working for seven years to teach CI at the university, to students who are beginners but even more: who do not have particular desire to practice CI. It's a joy, it's a fiasco, it's very random. Whatever

the strangeness of this experience, it will have taught me one thing: the fear that others feel is the raw material of my teaching. It's with the fear that I work. It's this fear that I work on through the bodies. It's not like this only for the young people I'm accompanying—they just offer me the gift of making that fear very direct, very perceptible.

Of course, there are fears that are already well documented: the fear of touching, of being touched / the fear of taking and especially of giving one's weight / the fear of losing face, of being disoriented / the fear of falling / etc .

But look well under these massive fears: I believe that they are driven by other anxieties less known, less discussed, more extensive and more somatically rooted.

I call them strong fears like loadbearing walls, blind fears like blind spots. Fears that we do not see.

Like what? Like being free.

Like what? Like releasing ideologies. Let see one, then the other.

- The fear of being free

CI offers a framework of experience, of improvised experience, where the fear of being free expresses itself spontaneously. Yes, but CI also offers here a key that seems very powerful to me: it is not a practice to transform the fear of being free into the joy of being free, but first of all into the joy of being absolutely subject to determinism.

What do we learn by practicing?

That our questions are not infinite chains. That they are not all relative, taken in systems of cultural, contextual, feminist relativity etc. Some end up, bump on a bottom. That is, there are substantial and commonly shared answers to potentially existential questions.

There is a pleasure not to doubt everything. There is a pleasure - hello Spinoza! to be determined by invariants:

- I think of the ground and its relentless answer (hard as a father)
- I think of the constant force of gravity (which is exercised in the middle of everything else that moves and varies)
- I also think about the dimension of our body as mass, its quality of matter. Mass, weight, levers, balance of forces, momentum.

CI allows me to experiment this physically. It brings me back by experience to this material that I am (also) (irreducibly).

Joy of reducing my body to only its dimension of physical mass (of object among the objects of the world) (of object engaged with the same physical laws as the dullest of pebbles).

Joy of tasting the determinism of matter, and gardening with this lack of fundamental freedom: as with your garden, do not fight against, but work with.

Saying that, I am not celebrating alienation to matter, I do not defend any speeches, I note one of the specificities of our practice - that which consists in seeking and experimenting this common point which makes us an accomplice of all that exists. Our destiny as heavy bodies, falling into the hole of earthly attraction. Our desire, from there, to gain a new form of freedom, from gravity and material alienation.

We are not free, sursum corda, let us rejoice!

We are happy to have a common base of experience.

Happy to reconstruct our gestosphere from the irreducible quality of the body-object. I mean: not to build a gesture on an idea, on an aesthetic, on a tradition, but on the basis of the nonhuman physicality of bodies, of the physicality of things.

We are happy to reconstruct our gestures from this zero degree, and with the help of new relational practices, new ways of attaching oneself, of detaching oneself from others, of being embodied by touch, and all the degrees of its sensitivity.

Lastly, joy of getting rid of the responsibility of having to do: to taste as a child, as a surfer, as a lover of rides, the pleasure of being moved, of being worn, of being acted upon by other forces than those we assume.

Contrary to the main discourses, and what we would like to see of free movements in the dance, I like to teach the joy of being an object in movement. We can disarm the fear of being free, by getting out of our heads the notion that we would have to be free. CI showed me this way.

- The fear of leaving ideologies:

Another fear lives in our practice. We guess it in the discourses produced around the dances, by the contacters themselves. This fear often shows its face in the heart of the sharing circles. This fear is the one that makes us say what we should think of our experience, rather than what we actually experience through it. It's the fear of leaving the mainstream roads of ideology.

I sit, my body a point in the speaking circle. This is the first, the tenth, the hundredth time that I hear evidences being shared, while each time a small voice, mute, in me, is groaning and suffocating.

I hear outside the apology of CI as a vehicle of democratic values.

I hear inside me annoyance, misguided anarchist roots, and the childish voice of Lisa Nelson saying: "Relax with hierarchy. I love to be the follower.

I hear outside desires to well-being, well-becoming, to feel good and even better after the jam. And between good people, the belief that CI will save the world.

I hear inside me a scratch on a disc, a discomfort in front of the legitimacy of these postures, and then something that breaks. Damn guys, this is a serious practice! Serious as an existence.

I hear outside people who like to separate the "body" from the "mind" (the nice pretty body of the big bad mind): oh, it is really very bad, this head, always forcing us to think, while the body is freedom, it is spontaneity, the thing to let go in nature without reins and without pilot. These people seem very sure of themselves and they especially very much want to agree with each other.

I hear inside me my tongue bleeding: the pain of a language that is abused, being made to speak in poor categories. I think of poetry, resistance, of the freshness of dissent.

I often come out of sharing circles transformed into a square, with so few angles, and so well stopped that I can only pronounce straight lines.

Our practice is much smarter than what is said, but it takes great courage to stop the ventriloquism of others in oneself.

I dream of a self-defense kit, a manual of ideological protection that would be provided with the practice, a critical equipment that would arm us against drifts and instrumentalizations of any order.

What are you doing to break out of ideologies? What are you doing to get your teaching out of the ideological traps?

Register that there is nothing implicit in the studio

Daring real explorations, rather than leaning on reproductive machines

Trying this. It's not easy.

The teaching situation that I know best makes the task somewhat easier: there is no implicit way between my students, the practice and me - no preconceived idea, no image, no prior experience in the somatic world or experimental movement practice in general. Most of my students dream of doing choreography like Beyoncé.

A nice pedagogic challenge because there is no evidence: neither to explore the movement of your attention (eh?), nor to connect to anything but a mirror (eh?), nor to produce a gesture without pre-existing design (huh?).

What does it require?

This obliges me to formulate, to explain and to forge first for myself, then for them, the tools of comprehension of the interior techniques that we mobilize. It invites me to start everything from the beginning.

In doing so, it makes us critical, that is, possibly creators of our own tools. We are no longer forced to the infinite reproduction of the same, to the thoughtless (though operative) recovery of a practice transmitted by this or that teacher and which we are retaining as such to others.

Getting out of ideologies is scary as long as you do not have the tools to chart your own path. And to learn how to learn, we must not forget to demystify the methods transmitted, to find the distance it takes with Daddy Paxton, mother Nancy, and all these wonderful teachers who have drilled a way to understand Contact. There is a moment of casualness that is good to take.

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Do you know the story of the crocodile and the philosopher?

1985. This is a true story.

A crocodile attacks, on a river in Kakadu National Park in Australia, a philosopher: Val Plumwood.

Plumwood is alone in a canoe. Attacked by the crocodile, she tries twice to get out of the river by clinging to a tree that hangs over her. Twice, two failures, terrible: the crocodile seizes her in the crotch and makes her undergo the swirl underwater by which it suffocates, encircles and annihilates any will to flee in its prey.

Extraordinary Plumwood. Baptiste Morizot says:

"As if terror had not disturbed her intelligence, and with that empathic courage (that of continuing to think in chaos, of being self-centered while fear and suffering lock everyone to himself), she makes the decision demanding the greatest force of soul: that of stopping to struggle, that of allowing oneself to slip away, motionless, in the current.

The trick works ». Plumwood is saved, hurt but safe.

This is a massive fear, with a big mouth.

Plumwood will learn a lesson: fear is not there to invite us to go beyond, to prove our courage. It serves first to become aware of your own vulnerability.

It is not a question of stopping fear, but of denying it the right to dictate our behavior and choices.

You can let fear roar inside you - without roaring yourself. "Without considering that fear is the truth of the situation, without letting it undermine an attentive smile or egoless intelligence, [you can be] off-center, on the lookout, make yourself available to the peaceful outcomes which are possible for any confrontation". (Morizot, *Sur la piste animale*, p. 64)

We must love our fears. Neither deny them nor give in to them. Work with.

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What does CI practice teach about crocodiles?

We have seen that it makes us confident in our own abilities

That it gives us empowering tools

This is all the more important today in a context of multiplication of crocodile pools, bear cages, wolf parks, and the generalized fear that accompanies them.

We thought we were safe at the very top of the food chain, and now there have been new (man-eating) contexts in recent years (decades).

I do not have time to detail them. I mention simply a few in order to give an idea of the interlocking scales of contemporary fear and the skills we have to deal with them:

> In the context of the ecological crisis, by which the risk of violent climatic disorders brings back all the contingencies of the unpredictability of the world;
Faced with this fear of a world that is starting to improvise, we are equipped with improvisation techniques that teach us calm vigilance with the unexpected.

> Faced with the context of the economic crisis and the deindexation of values, that is to say the realization that our value systems (moral, aesthetic, financial) are not based on anything. On nothing but valuation affects,
We know the value of the ground, and how to rebuild everything from its teaching. A system of embodied values, transpired from practice, rather than dictated from outside.

> Faced with the technological context of the crazy fluidification of all flows (of people, capital, information),
we know how to mobilize knowledge of surfers inserting themselves on a wave. How to absorb field accidents. How to be moved - that is, not to be an actor, but a negotiator among the forces involved.

> Faced with the political context of weakened democracies, populist waltzes and the migrant crisis,
We know how to live in a-national communities, and practice other forms of living. We have been decentered: "we" is not the plural of "I" / we know from experience that "we" is an expanded "I", an "I" that has opened up, open to what it is not.
Thus decentralized, lodged in the gaps of capitalism, we build treehouses: like refugees, like the anarchists of the ZAD, like the poets, "we imagine ways to live in a damaged world". And we are not afraid to call treehouses (with Marielle Macé) cabins of gestures, thought, friendship, new ways of representing space, time, action, links, practices. "Make treehouses to occupy the land anew; that is to say, always, today, to be multiple. "

The fears inherent in our practice
Join today in a series of massive fears, conjunctural,
Which form our new horizon
With which to learn to live

We need to learn to live with fear. Does CI give us ammunition?

Our practice traces at least one way to
Everytime
Convert fear into confidence

It gives us the power
To realize this trick
Which Victor Hugo speaks of in *Les Misérables*
And on which I will go to silence:
We must "surprise the disaster, by barely being afraid of it".

Works that inspired me during writing:

Marielle Macé, *Nos cabanes*, Paris, Verdier, 2019.

Baptiste Morizot, *Sur la piste animale*, Paris, Actes sud, coll. « mondes sauvages », 2018.