Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation

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Philosophy, Pedagogy, Practice

Edited by

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To practice

and
to practising

in many scales and proximities.

To discovery in practice.
To making real through practice.
To finding nuance through practice.
To being challenged by practising with others.

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INTRODUCTION

TOUCH: HOW DOES IT THINK? WHAT DOES IT DO?

MALAIKA SARCO-THOMAS

What is it "to be in touch"?—with ourselves, and with others? As a starting point for the opening jam at the world's largest annual contact improvisation gathering, teacher Chris Aiken posed this question in 2019. The invitation seemed to soften and focus attention both inwardly and outwardly in an enormous gym hall filled with more than three hundred dancers. Now in its twentieth year, Contact Festival Freiburg is going strong, and the touch-based movement practices explored there continue to foster new reflection and experimentation in action for me and many others. My regular participation in the teachers' meeting at Freiburg and other contact improvisation (CI) teacher exchanges in Europe since 2009 have been nutrient-rich doses of experiential research that offer responses to this foundational question. As a dancer and teacher, practising CI has been one way for me "to be in touch," and this book seeks to illuminate that process further. It offers a number of perspectives on how partnering dance might facilitate special ways of "thinking touch" or understanding connection.

The invitation "to think touch" is tricky for several reasons. Focusing on tactile activity can be a great antidote to an overactive brain, yet the reverse can also be true: certain kinds of thought can bring us away from sensation. Can thinking itself be touched? From my experiences of dancing and aikido practice, I would say yes: a partner's mental state can be read through the tone in his body, and particularly sensed through touch. Many massage therapists would agree. Can touch be thought? If so it invites the question of how to quantify and communicate something so intimate and ineffable as our experiences of touch in relation. Through the documentation of partnering practices, analysis of experiences, and considerations of cross-

disciplinary processes involving touch and movement, this volume is one attempt to study this question.

Partnering, in its many forms, comprises a wealth of knowledge in social, physical, and artistic practices. While the performing arts often tap into these forms as compositional resources, touch-based creative play within the areas of social dance, education, and contact improvisation are relatively under-explored areas of study. This book aims to address that gap. Contributions highlight choreographic, compositional, cognitive, pedagogic, somatic, and philosophical processes which inform thinking / knowing touch in partnering. This book has grown out of the 2016 Thinking Touch Conference organised by myself and Dr Brandon Shaw, with support from the Department of Dance Studies at the University of Malta. The conference took place in tandem with Contact Festival Dartington in Malta, an eight-day platform for sharing contemporary practices of CI via workshops, performance, jamming, and open space labs. The linked events invited a theoretical and practical focus on the thought processes and knowledges of touch enacted in partnering within martial arts, bodywork, therapies, medicine, science, and dance.

The following questions informed our curation of conference, festival, and book:

- What thought processes and knowledges are particular to partnering practices, and how might these be understood in relation to performance philosophy?
- What is embodied knowledge of anatomy, of physicality, and of working with the body in partnering work? How is this quantified and articulated in contemporary practices?
- How are emerging medical understandings of the body (such as mirror neurons and hormones) informing practices of touch in dance, and how might these partnering practices inform medical studies?
- How can touch offer non-logocentric modes for critical engagement with artistic and philosophical work?
- How can partnering and touch-based partnering practices be recorded, documented, and archived, and what are the implications for this within different fields of research?
- What can students and researchers of medicine, architecture, engineering, or psychology learn from partnering and contact improvisation? What are the applications to cross-disciplinary enquiry?
- How can partnering dance forms impact participants' health and wellbeing?

- What kinds of scores for practical engagement elicit different responses in practitioners and audiences?
- How do pedagogies of touch-based bodywork, contact improvisation, and partnering dance challenge or affirm diverse theories of learning?

While many of these questions still cry out for further exploration, insightful responses to a number of them have materialised in the form of this volume. What has emerged here is a book with four parts: choreographies of touch, pedagogies of touch, studies of touch, and philosophies of touch. Chapters include developed contributions from conference presentations, as well as new additions.

Part one gives insight into recent choreographic projects focusing on touch. In chapter one, choreographer and performer Jess Curtis discusses the haptic strategies used in giving sensory tours to audiences as part of his collaborative project with Claire Cunningham: *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*. Originally designed to expand access to audience members with sight impairment, the touch tours offer up further examples of how art invites audiences to enact different forms of perception. Next, Biliana Vassileva reflects on a personal account of Gaga movement practice, and the touch training built into this improvisational system. Her observations on both the kinds of instructions offered at a summer training in Tel Aviv and the evocative effects of Gaga's emphasis on detailed sensory experiencing build an experiential frame which lends insight into Erin Manning's philosophy and writings on touch. Following this, an artist dialogue with San Francisco-based choreographer Scott Wells, and Northwest UK-based choreographer Charlie Morrissey provides an account of how these two CI teachers and performance-makers draw on their practices of touch in choreographic research and composition.

Part two features four empirical studies of touch within partnering and improvisation. Neuroscientist Corinne Jola analyses the results of an experiment designed to ascertain the developing experiences of people in different roles of improvised touch-based bodywork and movement. Building on recent research into empathy and synchronisation between dancers, her study analyses the drawings of givers and receivers of touch who experience various stages of a bodywork activity, noting the increasingly abstract qualities of the drawings produced by participants as the lab progressed. She considers this in light of recent studies which suggest that experiencing touch can help create a more unified body schema. She further asks how qualitative methods might also inform the design of future empirical research into this area. The next chapter co-authored by myself and medical doctor Rebecca Zammit describes a pilot project to bring contact improvisation training to university students of the health sciences. An account of improvisation's

usefulness to the emerging field of medical humanities is given, and the reports on the pilot project make a case for the value of CI practice to provide students with original and somatic perspectives on the body. In the following chapter, dance artist Dorte Bjerre Jensen recounts her methods of facilitating a series of labs in Erin Manning's process philosophy, for people new to CI. The question of how to communicate discoveries about touch through language is echoed here, and Jensen shares scores designed to encourage her participants to tune to emerging discoveries about changing sensations, perceptions, and even worldview, through touch. In the last chapter Raffaele Rufo offers an account of practice-based research in tango. He uses the concept of contagion to build an argument for how both partners experience and are reciprocally affected by the kind of invitations towards movement that the intimate tango embrace makes possible.

Part three looks at practices for teaching touch within performance training contexts. Maria Paz Brozas Polo reviews a broad range of *Contact Quarterly* journals, analysing the "CI Essentials" sections for clues on how CI teachers language touch in their instructions. Linking to the writings of José Gil and James Gibson, she shows how the language of touch in CI points to the synaesthetic totality of "the whole body as a touch-moving sense" and the deep interrelationship of touch and vision in this dance. She advocates exploring reversibility between these senses in practice. Next Alexander Technique teacher and contact improvisation pedagogue Lucia Walker shares her thoughts on the practice of conscious inhibition in dancing and in touching. Linking to the writing of FM Alexander and Marion Milner she builds an enlightening case for the project of stopping what we automatically do in order to be able to notice what we *don't know*, and hence what else might be possible. Finally Vanio Papadelli, a lecturer who trains drama students in movement awareness fundamentals, shares her approach to touch-based pedagogy for performance. Linking to somatic practices and Eastern European laboratory theatre, and more specifically the Post-Grotowskian methods, she outlines key factors of her approach to using touch-based methods to train actors in psycho-physicality.

Part four features several philosophical discussions on the sense of touch in dance, in tactile engagement with materials, and in martial arts. Brandon Calleja Shaw explores the implications of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1948 radio lectures to our experiences of how we sense nonhuman matter, considering how such contact informs a sense of connection with our environment. Merleau-Ponty's two-way conceptualisation of touch (considering that what I touch also touches me) suggests that movement practices involving work with objects, such as staffs in martial arts, can inform our capacity to both "listen" and "speak"

with the world around us through touch. In the next chapter Carolien Hermans builds on these ideas through an extended discussion of the notion of "the animal body" in CI and in relation to prosthetic limbs. Drawing on the work of key artists who creatively use prosthetics in their practice she also implements Merleau-Ponty's ideas to outline how the borders of the body, and its connections to the world, can be creatively reimagined, and physicalised, through touch-based practices such as CI. Next Ilya Vidrin discusses ethics in touch by considering the nuances of partnering in relation to notions of "effective communication." His analysis of the inevitable bumps and misunderstandings within dance partnering serves to build a case for how and when partnering might be considered "skilful," and suggests that engagement in such practices can also support an embodied understanding of ethics. Finally Nita Little and Joseph Dumit conclude part four with an extended consideration of how attention can be understood as a tactile force in performance and in contact improvisation. Accounts of practical CI training and performance training exercises are analysed for how they encourage a deeper understanding of the "painting" and "receiving" of attention in relation to a partner, and through the whole body.

In a culture increasingly reliant on virtual and screen-based forms of teaching, business, gaming, entertainment, and communication, research is showing that paying attention to tactile, physical engagement holds an important key to empathy and wellbeing. A recent publication in *The Annals of Internal Medicine* featuring analysis of studies of more than 23,000 people with dementia reported that tactile engagement with the physical world through outdoor activities, gardening, and massage were more effective than pharmaceuticals in reducing aggression and agitation (Biegler 2019; Watt et al 2019). The work of physician Tiffany Field, in publications such as *Touch* (2001), also evidences the nutrient-like status of caring touch and massage for newborn and developing humans, inducing the production of hormones such as oxytocin crucial for health and human connection (Zak 2011). Not surprisingly, these findings also show how isolation breeds dysfunction.

Contact-based movement practices provide an important contribution to investigations of touch. In *Body and Mind in Motion*, Glenna Batson and Margaret Wilson (2015) outline how somatic enquiry—focusing on the felt experience of the body, often in tandem with partner touch—supports the evolving field of embodiment studies emerging through dance and neuroscience in dialogue. In *Touching and Being Touched*, Gabriele Brandstetter, Gerko Egert, and Sabine Zubarik (2013) curate a series of articles outlining the connections between "being touched" emotionally and tactile touch in dance. The diverse collection gives insight into how

movement and performance stimulate kinaesthetic empathy through shaping attention. Such practices can also shape an expanded sense of self, and relationality, especially when exercised through performance. This is a key revelation in the recent collection edited by Lynette Hunter, Elisabeth Krimmer, and Peter Lichtenfels, *Sentient Performativites of Embodiment: Thinking Alongside the Human* (2016), in which contributors outline acts of everyday and more formal performance for the agency this brings about through feeling. As a key contributor to the development of contact improvisation, Nita Little argues that the attentional practices uniquely found in CI are an act of giving, because: "identity in an active practice of relations is associated not with bound physicality, but rather with active sensing" (2014). Feeling into another through an improvised duet often leads to feelings of intimacy and connection, and the added ingredient of touch can maximise production of the hormone oxytocin. Stephen Borges explores the neurophysiology of empathy and love in mammalian bonds as expressed through oxytocin (1998) and found in contemplative practices such as meditation and dance (2014). He notes that "successful training promotes a resilient autonomic nervous system." He suggests that practices which develop autonomic nervous system regulation pave the route towards "enhanced compassion." He emphasises the importance of safe contexts, active rituals, and repetition to develop "experiences of compassion and a sense of oneness" (2017, 201). In other words, when it comes to touch, feeling, empathy, and relationality, practice matters.

Throughout this book are calls to explore touch through the experiences of dancing, improvising, choreographing, performing, bodywork, and teaching. The intelligent flesh of our "animal body" is considered as key to this exploration, just as the notion of flesh is central to touch. Merleau-Ponty's idea of flesh as reversible and bridging inner and outer worlds is cited in many of the chapters, for example Biliana Vassileva's contribution which asks how Gaga can increase sensitivity to our capacities for movement and sensation. She writes: "the prevailing question is how to invent, event-fully, what touch can do?" Such a question can only be answered through the practice of touch itself, and by thinking through this process.

In the first days of an embryo's development, its cells fold into three layers, and the shared cells of the ectoderm eventually become both skin on the outside, and the brain plus nervous system on the inside. Bodyworker and author Deane Juhan considers this alliance, writing: "skin and brain develop from exactly the same primitive cells. Depending upon how you look at it, the skin is the outer surface of the brain, or the brain is the deepest layer of the skin" (1998, 35). Flesh as tissue which connects sensing inside

to sensing outside might also be an apt metaphor for the project of thinking touch: both by enfolding skin surfaces into brain, and enfolding an enquiry into the other to bring a similar attention to our own sensory depths. Thinking touch might be simply about valuing touch anew, and offering some routes towards re-finding our primate roots of tactility. It is my hope that the invitations here suggest modes and motivations to be in touch more.

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PART I

CHOREOGRAPHIES OF TOUCH

CHAPTER ONE

THE WAY YOU LOOK (AT ME) TONIGHT: TOUCH TOURS, HAPTIC PRACTICES, AND SENSORY STRATEGIES

JESS CURTIS

The Way You Look (at me) Tonight is a dance-based performance project co-conceived, created, and performed by myself (Jess Curtis) and the Scottish, self-identified disabled artist Claire Cunningham. The project was a collaboration with renowned author and philosopher of perception Alva Noë, along with video artist Yoann Trellu, composer Matthias Herrmann, and dramaturge Luke Pell. The work draws on Noë's theories of enactive perception, interrogating our perceptual skills and habits, particularly in relation to our perception of otherness. This article will particularly address the use of the "touch tour" practice, haptic performances, and other modes of sensory accommodation in the work.

> How do we look at each other? How do we allow ourselves to be seen? How do our physicalities shape the ways we perceive the world around us? How much can we affect the way we see others? Can we learn to see across lines of difference in new ways? (Cunningham and Curtis 2017)

Our work has emerged, and benefits from, a convergence of several simultaneous historical streams of concern regarding: 1) democratising the access of diverse bodies to performance; 2) the mobilisation of multi-sensory performance practices by artists; and 3) the examination and theorisation of phenomenologies of perception in performance. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to articulate details of each of these streams I will mention some contributors to these discourses that have affected my understanding. Several authors such as Ann Cooper Albright (1997), Adam Benjamin (2002), Petra Kuppers (2004), and Rosemary Garland Thompson (2009) to name a few, have addressed the access of diverse bodies to the act of performing, although mostly from the side of the entrance of performers

with diverse physicalities onto the stage. In *The Senses in Performance* (2007) Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki have gathered and edited a number of authors cataloguing and reflecting on the specifics of artistic works that mobilise the full range of sensorial possibilities in performance. Performance works like Ishmael Houston-Jones' *In the Dark* (1990), Nora Chipaumire's *Miriam* (2012) and Tino Seghal's *This Variation* (2012) have made important contributions to this discourse, utilising darkness to destabilise the effects of oculocentric experience on performance. Theoretically addressing the dynamic relationship that the physicality of the attendees has to performance, writers such as Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), Susan Foster (2008), and Dee Reynolds (2013) have drawn on the work of philosophers ranging from Spinoza, Bergson, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Gibson, Noë, and others, as well as more recent research in cognitive neuroscience to think through the ways that performance reaches out and touches us. Brandstetter, Egert, and Zubarik's recent volume *Touching and Being Touched: Kinesthesia and Empathy in Dance and Movement* (2013) gathers the work of a number of authors to specifically consider touch and haptic experience within the realm of performance.

On several levels the primary, staged aspect of the project—a 110-minute evening-length theatrical performance—attempts to produce experiences for attendees that underscore or highlight their own perceptual performances and relations to different sensory modalities. The work is unconventionally staged, with much of the audience seated throughout the performance space, facing in different directions, requiring that they continually re-orient themselves physically as we, the two performers, move throughout the space, in and around them. Over the course of the evening we speak, dance, sound, and sing. Yoann Trellu's video is projected on three sides of the playing space and Matthias Hermann's recorded score plays from a four-channel speaker system with a speaker in each corner of the room.

Much of the language content of the sound score that is played for the entire audience takes inspiration from audio-descriptive practices and describes our movements, motivations, and felt experience, allowing for access to non-visible elements of our performance. Much of this textual content is simultaneously presented visually through captions on the three large video screens that surround the space, and for at least one night's performance in each city where we present the work we engage a sign language interpreter to interpret for D/deaf attendees. The collaborative team also worked with professional audio-describer Emma-Jane McHenry to develop a recorded audio description track that can be delivered via a wireless audio headset system to visually impaired (VI) attendees. As a

leading proponent of accessibility in performance in the UK, Claire Cunningham has always made sensory accommodation a priority in her work, but with this project we were particularly interested in a deeper research into sensory access accommodations as the work itself posed questions of perception and how different modes and skills of sensing produce our perceptual experience. It is in this context that, working with Emma-Jane and a number of visually impaired performance makers as consultants, we developed a pre-show touch tour for VI attendees and make it available at least one night in each of the cities we play in.

The touch tour

Touch tours are a sensory accommodation practice developed primarily in the United Kingdom and are popular in the theatre and in museum and gallery practice. The touch tour practice attempts to make art forms that are primarily visual (i.e., visual art and live performance) more accessible to VI attendees by giving them the opportunity to experience objects, performance spaces and sometimes even the performers themselves through touch, thereby giving them access through tactile experience to information that is otherwise only transmitted visually to audience members (accessibletheatre.org).[1] In museum and gallery settings touch tours are usually limited to specifically curated objects and led by a docent who gives descriptive and historical information regarding the objects. For performances, touch tours are usually offered in addition to audio-description services and offer a kind of cross referential, tactile/haptic experience of elements in a performance that will later be referred to in the audio description of the work.

The term "visually impaired" can refer to a fairly broad range of visual capacities. Many people that identify as VI have access to some amount of visual experience, differentiating light and dark or having some capacity to recognise shapes of differing sizes, or placement in their visual field. Differing levels of visual acuity in different parts of the visual field may shape very different visual capacities for engaging with one's surroundings. According to the World Health Organization (2014) roughly 13% of visually impaired people are completely blind.

Our touch tour experience begins one hour before the scheduled curtain time of the show. Claire and myself meet visually impaired guests, who have

[1] For a complete and very useful explanation of the touch tour practice go to: http://www.accessibletheatre.org.uk/access-co-ordinators/audio-description/touch-tours/

usually pre-booked the tour, in the lobby, or they are escorted from the lobby by the house manager or ushers. Our first task is always to introduce ourselves. In addition to having very different voices and accents Claire and I are of considerably different stature and this size difference is usually a primary initial visual experience for attendees at our performances (see Figure 1-1). It also plays into the content of our work, both physically and narratively and for us is a meaningful part of the physical relationship we perform. While one might infer a general difference in our size while standing near us from the location of our voices and our apparent gender, we invite touch tour participants to initially touch our shoulders in order to experience the difference in our statures more specifically.

Figure 1-1. Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis. Photo by hagolani.com.

A fourteen-foot high A-frame ladder stands at the back of the playing space. Participants are invited to feel its aluminium structure and explore it a bit with their hands, while cane users will often tap it to explore its material

qualities, shape, and size. During the performance Claire, using her crutches, slides the ladder across the floor creating a very distinctive stuttering noise against the vinyl dance floor as the ladder rattles along, towering above her. In addition to the audible noise of the ladder, there is usually a distinct vibration that can be felt through the floor. Our goal in the touch tour is a synaesthetic one, allowing the VIPs (visually-impaired persons) to connect the sound they will hear, and the stuttering vibration of its feet on the vinyl floor, with the ladder and its specific materiality. As sighted individuals we take for granted this synaesthetic simultaneity of visual and aural information that informs us of the distal world around us. The touch tour allows those tactile and kinaesthetic experiences of feeling the cold aluminium, measuring its width and height through the stretching of arms, the reach of a cane, and through locomotion, by orienting its location in the room in relation to the seat one has chosen. The physical understanding of Claire's stature, juxtaposed against the felt experience of the size and materiality of the ladder is dramaturgically essential to at least one experience of the event as Claire performs it (see Figure 1-2). Sighted individuals readily apprehend the incongruity of a four-foot tall woman with crutches pushing a fourteen-foot tall ladder across the stage. This same incongruity can be transmitted by the touch tour through allowing VI individuals to experience the performative effect of the action.

Figure 1-2. Combining projection with X and Y performance elements in *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*. Photo by hagolani.com.