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## VIEWPOINT

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# Sightless touch and touching witnessing: Interplays of Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation

### ABSTRACT

*This article reflects on combinations of the somatic practices of Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation in group facilitation and artistic development. It examines benefits of the two practices, individually, while also considering insights the author has gleaned, more specifically, as to the unique creative and therapeutic opportunities made available through different movement investigations of eyes-closed touch. Interwoven in the article are artist and facilitator reflections, student commentaries, and texts of somatic practitioners from both the United States and the United Kingdom.*

### KEYWORDS

Authentic Movement  
Contact Improvisation  
touch  
witnessing  
presence  
reciprocity  
interoceptive  
proprioceptive  
disorientation

1. SOMA Fest, founded in 2007 by Los Angeles-based somatic practitioner and performer Teri Carter, is the first festival of its kind devoted to 'Conscious Embodiment in Practice, Performance and Daily Life'. Committed practitioners of a wide variety of somatic disciplines, among them Body-Mind Centering, Contact Improvisation, Continuum, Feldenkrais, Laban-Bartiniéff, Skinner Releasing, and the work of Anna Halprin, participate in the festival faculty; they illustrate manifold possibilities for integrating somatic inquiry and awareness into enlivened and transformative performing and practice. 'When a group of somatic practitioners come together there is the possibility for some real breakthrough', Carter states. 'People in somatics have made specific choices to go beyond certain ways of being and moving. It takes a conscious choice to allow something more [than the culture's emphasis on fear, isolation and limited physicality] into our system' (Carter 3 December 2009 interview).

2. This concept certainly warrants a more in-depth inquiry into anatomical and physiological effects of experiences of touch and sightlessness on the nervous system, about which I am intrigued, but unqualified to speak at this time. However, somatic movement therapy and education underscore countless supports to our organism, about which we may and may

*It Felt Love  
How  
Did the rose  
Ever open its heart  
And give to this world  
All its  
Beauty?  
It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its  
Being,  
Otherwise,  
We all remain  
Too  
Frightened.*  
- Hafiz

Of the somatic practices I have explored over the last two decades, Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation are the two disciplines with which I have been most engaged. Each has significantly influenced and shaped my work as an artist, an educator and a performer, and it is through both of these approaches that I have gained invaluable self-knowledge, insight and inspiration. In September of 2008 I felt fortunate to participate as a member of the teaching and performance faculty of the Los Angeles-based SOMA Fest,<sup>1</sup> and to offer a workshop interweaving aspects of these two practices. In this class, and in a panel discussion following the faculty concert, I spoke to links we might make between the two techniques; the influence and support we receive generally from our moving and witnessing partners in these practices; and a broadened palette on which we might also draw as artists and performers by virtue of experiences of eyes-closed touch.<sup>2</sup>

Somatic educators posit that engaging in embodied, improvised explorations provides participants opportunities to connect with insights into their emotional, spiritual and physical well-being, both within themselves and as they interrelate with others (Williamson 2009). The intimacy of partnered exercises – whether those exploring stationary witnesses and physically engaged eyes-closed movers, as in Authentic Movement practice, or those involving two or more moving partners attending a dance of physical contact, as in Contact Improvisation dance – can further support these investigations. Through my explorations in the intentional intersection of the two practices – calling upon some of the benefits of respectful, supportive touch; deep, interoceptive attention; and reciprocity within the relationships among participants – I have found that my colleagues, students and I have experienced enhanced feelings of both vulnerability and security. We thereby may vastly expand our possibilities with regard to the personal insights and artistic resources we may tap.

This article<sup>3</sup> reflects on these somatic practices, supporting their combination in group facilitation and artistic development. Interweaving artist and facilitator reflections as well as student commentaries, it considers the unique creative and therapeutic opportunities made available through different movement investigations of eyes-closed touch. The first two sections examine

the two practices individually, identifying some of the attributes, benefits and overlap I have found in exploring the practices of Contact Improvisation and Authentic Movement. The latter sections of the article share insights I have gleaned, more specifically, through the interplay of eyes-closed investigation and instances of physical touch.

## INTERCONNECTION AND SUPPORT THROUGH SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Authentic Movement is a contemplative movement practice founded in the 1950s in the United States by dance therapy pioneer, and former Mary Wigman dancer, Mary Starks Whitehouse. To this day, it is utilized as physical exploration, creative and artistic resource, therapeutic modality, and as a ritualized form of moving meditation (Lowell 2007). Within the practice, eyes-closed ‘movers’, benefitted by the attention of eyes-open ‘witnesses’, tend their own, immediate interoceptive experience. They may notice, as they surrender to impulses of their bodies to move and to be still, complex ranges of sensation, emotional feeling, narrative or image that arise in the process. The concept of moving purely for its own sake, without utilitarian orientation, can feel both liberating and daunting; many movers experience a deep sense of joy in the self-care they provide when stopping to listen carefully to their bodies’ inclinations. They can yield freely to a sense of ‘being moved’ (Whitehouse 1999) by their bodies, secure in the knowledge that their witnesses will attend them compassionately, track time and in some cases regard their physical safety in space.

One of the things I love most about the [Authentic Movement practice] is having the freedom to move in whatever way feels right for my body, without being judged – simply accepted and respected. The sense of calm that I feel in each session is evident throughout the rest of my week.

[...] I cherish the wonderful gifts this class has given me – a renewed sense of self-awareness through uninhibited movement and a rediscovery of the beauty and simplicity of life.

(Student response 2007)

Witnesses, eyes open, offering movers their compassionate, focused attention, are generally charged with ‘containing’ the session, or holding a sense of consciousness within the room. Practitioners place much emphasis on the responsibility a witness holds towards a mover, both regarding the attention one pays during the movement session itself and afterwards, when mover and witness may relay to one another their experiences. As the practice has evolved from Whitehouse’s initial explorations of ‘Movement in Depth’, to ‘Authentic Movement’, coined by her most senior students, Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow,<sup>4</sup> subsequent facilitators have stressed the use of a very particular kind of language witnesses might use in responding to the mover’s process. In order to uphold the mover’s sense of self-authority<sup>5</sup> in his or her process, as well as to tend the initial, often vulnerable, state a mover may inhabit, witnesses clearly and carefully emphasize the subjectivity of the imagery, sensation, narrative and emotion by which they have responded.

Newer students and practitioners can sometimes feel daunted by the prospect of serving as a *good witness*. They often, for instance, experience undue concern over recalling the movement and with their subsequent ability to report back or speak sufficiently to what their partners have done. However, although

not be aware, which we receive in the presence of intentional, safe touch and in deep, interoceptive investigation. Among the many writers who speak to the transformative support of touch in somatic work are Deane Juhan in *Touched by the Goddess: The Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Powers of Bodywork* and Don Hanlon Johnson in *The Protean Body*. In addition, countless teachers of Contact Improvisation (among them Kirstie Simson, Carolyn Stuart and K. J. Holmes) emphasize the nurturing attributes of touch within that form.

3. This article is a revised version of an essay I wrote while a graduate student in the programme MA Dance and Somatic Well-being: Connections to the Living Body, University of Central Lancashire (an approved programme of ISMETA). A paper I wrote based on these themes and on their specific application to teaching students at university appears in the volume *Encounters With Contact*, edited by Ann Cooper Albright.
4. Having established with Joan Chodorow an institute in Mary Whitehouse’s name, and further developing the role of witness to be held not by a separate facilitator but by other movers in the circle, Janet Adler subsequently renamed the practice to encompass its many components. Writings by all three of these pioneers have been published in a 1999 compilation edited by Patrizia Pallaro.
5. Among the themes consistently emphasized within somatic education

is that of the self-authority and agency of individuals as participants in our own care, and in the myriad decisions of our lives. Don Hanlon Johnson speaks to this with earnest, political conviction in *Body: Recovering Our Sensual Wisdom*. He identifies the limitations of societally taught, frozen postures (the status quo), and a culture of authoritarianism that shapes our bodies such that we now must relearn a sense of embodied self-authority (Johnson 1992: 33).

the witness tends the mover with such care, and the experience of the mover is regarded most often as 'primary', within the practice of Authentic Movement participants can feel a true reciprocity with regard to the role each holds.

Most of us know a great longing for both within our nature, to see ourselves and to see each other. How simple this can sound, how complex, incomplete, and mysterious this is. I once heard a mover say to her witness: 'When I see you seeing me, I stay nearer to myself'.

(Adler 2007: 260)

Movers report a sense of gratitude for 'being held' by the witness, and many witnesses describe feelings of care, protectiveness and tenderness towards their moving partners. They acknowledge the rare privilege of intimately watching people so deeply engaged in their process, often reporting a kind of awe they feel in response to their partners' explorations. As Andrea Olsen acknowledges,

Within the spectrum of collective experience, there is a tremendous relief both as a mover and as a watcher as we realize that we are participants in a larger whole. If we are attentive to our unconscious, and others to theirs, there is an inherent order, unfolding, and relationship that occurs.

(Olsen 2007: 323)

When witnesses become aware of the depth of their own responses, projections and associations, they find that the mover's process has served to hold a mirror up to them; the movers facilitate a kind of self-discovery the witnesses may access in unexpected ways.

In a recent class of mine, a student reported her response to witnessing one of her peers extending his arms out to the sides, palms upturned, for what she experienced as a long period of time. As he had held out his hands she imagined each containing an 'option' being offered her. Eventually, as he had lowered his arms in a slow, sustained manner towards the ground, she found herself feeling slightly uncomfortable and anxious; she associated the gesture with a growing need to make a choice before his hands hit the floor. In recounting her response, she identified an overemphasis she felt she had recently placed on decision making, and an ease with which she wished to conduct herself in the near future. Laughing, she expressed gratitude that in essence, and in her experience, this mover had moved on her behalf. Through exploration of the intimate, partnered practice of Authentic Movement, as in Contact Improvisation dance, participants may help to facilitate for one another the identification of personal affinities, imagery and themes; in this way, as well, we may challenge conceptions of our bodies and our 'selves', thereby aiding our self-knowledge, spiritual growth and artistic development.

## **EMBRACING DISORIENTATION, RE-IMAGINATION OF SELF, AND EMBODYING MULTIDIMENSIONALITY IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION DANCE**

To look at our lives differently, to find the possibility of change, requires first that we loosen the reflex of habitual responses – the shapes,

postures and judgements which order our lives – and open our eyes and ears; tune ourselves to different frequencies and details, patterns of movement and shadow; listen, explore and get to know the many selves and voices that live within us.

(Tufnell 2000: 12)

In Contact Improvisation – a postmodern, partner dance form first investigated by Judson Church choreographer Steve Paxton, in 1972 (Novack 1990) – dancers attend the various ways in which our bodies, through the use of gravity, momentum, skeletal alignment and embodied ‘listening’, may move in concert with one another. Cultivating a strongly felt quality of presence, we engage deeply with our interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness and yield to (or choose among) the unique movement possibilities offered within each particular moment. As in Authentic Movement, Contact dancers explore movement as initiated from the entire body without privileging certain parts utilized in more traditional approaches to dance.<sup>6</sup>

Through sustained, dynamic interaction with the bodies of other movement partners, we allow a dance continually to unfold. Collaboratively, instinctually, we attend our own and one another’s physical impulses and invite new movement possibilities through the initiation of touch; we challenge one another to follow unique trajectories that may feel unfamiliar and beyond our individual control.<sup>7</sup> ‘At its best’, as Ann Cooper Albright notes, the practice ‘reorders our traditional Western conceptions of the body and identity. The sense of the self as an ego that goes forth to make its mark on the world (the frontier mentality) is subtly reshaped into a sense of one’s own body as it exists in space and with others’<sup>8</sup> (Albright 2003: 208).

In contact dances, partners negotiate disorientation,<sup>9</sup> intimacy, boundary-setting and self-care. Teachers of the form underscore the importance of listening to one’s own bodily limits and of supporting others physically only to the best of one’s capacity to maintain structural integrity and health. We might emphasize the philosophical standpoint, that by serving our own body’s physical and emotional requirements, we honour our partners’ right to self-care; we simultaneously hold our partners’ best interests at heart. This applies to experiences of weight-sharing among movers, as well as the choices dancers might make in resisting or yielding to trajectories or movement qualities offered within the dance. Dancers learn to listen to one another for signals as to where in the body to place weight, where to lighten or retract contact, and with which qualities of movement to meet one another in rapport. As a safety measure, and in support of a sense of self-responsibility and self-care, Contact dancers learn how to spiral or fall softly to the floor, enabling our partners to release us at any time.

I think CI is an interesting metaphor for life. As we move we have an idea about where we are going. Once there is contact that movement is changed. We can move dynamically with that change, or keep pushing to force our will, our idea about where to go. That’s when it loses its beauty, its grace. As we synchronize and move in harmony with one another is when it is joyful and playful and creative.

(Student response 2008)

Through the particular lens of each dance, in interplays of bodies in and out of physical contact with one another, movers can observe their emotional, physical, interpersonal and intellectual patterns. They may identify roles with which

6. Andrea Olsen speaks to an ‘asymmetrical’ movement initiation in these practices, as ‘techniques which focus on stimulating and responding to all surfaces and structures of the body equally’ (Olsen 2004: 24). Many teachers of Contact Improvisation, as well as Body-Mind Centering practitioners or dancers with a strong influence of the practice, invite students to engage with tissues and organs rarely emphasized in other dance investigation.
7. Don Hanlon Johnson underscores the following theme of Somatic Movement Education: that of identifying and supporting our organisms’ homeostatic need to respond to changes in our environment with flexibility and adaptability. ‘The problem with the status quo’, he states, ‘is that many of our personal and social conflicts come from confronting new situations with old stances’ (Johnson 1992: 34).
8. Steve Paxton, founder of Contact Improvisation, speaks to the influences and inspiration for his earliest explorations of the form, in his article ‘Drafting Interior Techniques’. He describes questions commensurate with the investigations of other somatic pioneers as to the roles both nature and culture play in our structural formation: ‘I assumed that the body, having evolved for millions of years on this planet, was tuned first by planetary things that create our potentials, and second by cultural things that develop

select parts of the potential [...] the basic question was: potential for what? What had the culture physically suppressed or selected out that we might reclaim?' (Paxton 2003: 179).

9. 'Visual continuity', Steve Paxton states, 'is one of the many ways we "know where we are" and not knowing where we are is experienced as an emergency situation.[...] Contact Improvisation constantly challenges one's orientation: visual, directional, balance, and where in the body the consciousness is positioned' (Paxton 2003: 178).
10. Cynthia Novack makes reference to these points in her 1990 volume *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, taking an anthropological look at the phenomenon of the development of the dance form. Additionally, innumerable movers have generously explored the topics of gender, mixed-ability, sexuality and sensuality in the pages of the decades-run journal *Contact Quarterly*.
11. During part of the 1997–1998 Contemplative Dance Year-Long Programme (an Authentic Movement training in Western Massachusetts, founded by Alton Wasson, Mary Ramsay and Daphne Lowell, of which I am a graduate), Wasson spoke to the delight of moving in concert with others and incorporating them into the particular worlds of our movement explorations.

they feel most familiar, and those which find them at their edges of comfort; these may take the shape of seeming dichotomies of nurturer/receiver of care, supporter/supported, leader/follower and initiator/responder. As dancers we can inspire one another to expand on individual, familiar ranges of personal characteristics, by exploring dances that investigate intimacy, vulnerability, playful aggression, fluidity, sensuality, angularity, competition, mischievousness, contrariness, virtuosity and awkwardness. As is often noted, historically<sup>10</sup> – in service, perhaps, to such broadening of our self-definition – Contact Improvisation has challenged societal assumptions about proper exchanges of touch, as well as expectations with regard to traditional gender roles and physical ability more commonly observed in western culture and dance.

### **'YOU CAN BE ANYTHING I WANT YOU TO BE [...] IN MY STORY'.<sup>11</sup>: IMAGERY AND NARRATIVE IN EYES-CLOSED TOUCH**

*I roll my head back and forth, back and forth across this vibrant green, moss covered, tree root. Soft, warm, spring air circles my face as I rotate, tilting toward the sun. I ready myself to roll down a vast, sloping hill – meet forgiving ground underneath, spiraling, reaching toward me. Humming insects in pond. Reservoir for many to drink, play, hibernate, vibrate, survive [...] vital. I meet love in these green, soft places, and care. Young, I am, and greet the world whirring past as I slip down, spiral; hands open, grab fistfuls of bright grasses as I pass under noon sun peeking through rosy eyelids.*

(From personal movement journal 2009)

In a recent Authentic Movement session, after several minutes of working on my own, eyes closed – attending my body's desires to move low across the floor, to extend and draw in my arms and legs, arc and reach through my hips, and to allow my breath sounds to become audible – I come upon other movers in the room. A soft, yielding quality of touch against my legs and the sound of another mover's gentle humming transport me instantly to a particular and very different time and place. I inch towards the sound, lie down, rest my head in the crook of this mover's arm, and spiral my body back and forth. Although I am fleetingly aware of with whom and against what body part I rest, in these moments, for me, my partner's arm ceases to belong to him, but to become the root at the base of a tree, covered in a spongy, velvet moss. I lie on the floor, rotating the back of my skull against this inviting shoulder/arm/root/moss. I listen to the humming that has, for me, become the sound of insects and frogs in a large pond close to where I grew up. I feel a sense of safety and containment; I am five years old, playing in a fragrant, soft and benevolent world towards which I hold no particular responsibility.

When asked about his own experience of our movement interaction, my moving partner reports that he too has experienced the touch not primarily as a meeting of two human bodies, but of complex, living organisms he has distinguished from our specific personas. His eyes sparkle as he recounts his fascination with the structural support he has offered to the organic form resting against him. He has focused his attention on minute shifts he made within his body, creating a subtly different landscape on which this creature might rest. He likens this to providing the comfort of a soft bed or womb, which, slightly buoyant and responsive, offers variety, engagement and true support. He speaks to an experience of 'vitality', of a feeling of 'warmth that I was

both seeking and providing' and of 'safety, foundation, and connection'; he connects, in this moment, in a signature, playful manner, with his desire and impulse to provide nurture.

My arrival at this mover's side and my choice to yield the weight of my head to his arm has opened a thread of inquiry within this session that he may not have accessed on his own. Likewise, without the support of this touch interaction I may neither have known myself to yearn for that particular experience of safety, nor, necessarily, how to have provided it at that moment. 'When movement is liberated', as somatic pioneer Anna Halprin states, 'from the constricting armor of stylized, pre-conceived gestures, an innate feedback process between movement and feelings is generated' (Halprin 2000: 24). Through engagement in our own, individual processes, and availability to one another's investigations, this mover and I facilitate the development of new pathways for one another between our movement and emotional states.

12. Many Contact instructors use blindfolds in teaching, enabling students to access new proprioceptive experiences, among them Carolyn Stuart, Olive Bieringa and Gretchen Spiro. The *Angel Score* is a specific practice I developed with my long-time teaching partner Mark Koenig with which we have worked both in our classes and in performance together.

### **ANGELS IN OUR MIDST: INTERWOVEN EXPLORATIONS OF CONTACT AND AUTHENTIC MOVEMENT**

As a teacher and a dancer myself, I have enjoyed offering other movers an opportunity to experience intentional, direct, hands-on support to their eyes-closed dances. In my workshop at SOMA Fest, entitled *Angels in Our Midst*, I led participants through exercises that had them work, alternately, as 'authentic' movers with physically engaged, active witnesses, and as blindfolded contact improvisers, exploring (amongst their other discoveries) the enhanced internal and kinesthetic experiences available to them without their sight. As a culminating exploration in the class, groups of dancers worked in trios, participating in an extended, rotating exercise my long-time collaborator Mark Koenig and I call *The Angel Score*.<sup>12</sup> In this score (meaning the guidelines under which the improvised dance is created) a blindfolded dancer begins to solo in the space, witnessed at a distance, for several minutes, by two partners. As the witnesses watch their partner, they do so with an eye to receiving an impression of the unfolding dance, of the qualities of movement their partner explores, and to feeling a connection to his or her body in space. They might imagine a cord stretching from the mover's centre of gravity to their own, enabling them to begin to sense their own bodies moving in resonance with the dancer's. Gradually, the witnesses move closer to their partner, sometimes mirroring the movement, sometimes simply standing in close proximity, and allowing the mover to sense their presence. The soloist may then begin to draw on the support of the sighted dancers to aid in allowing the dance its fullest expression. In the care of these two unseen 'angels' the blindfolded dancer may freely make even the boldest of requests.

When leading the exercise, I suggest exploring many possible manifestations of support; the two witnesses listen carefully for 'requests' their partner might make, by reaching out an arm for counterbalance, by leaning in, climbing on the witnesses, nestling in, remaining still, falling forward or backward into space. Support, I offer, might best be given at times even by entrusting weight to the blindfolded partner, providing compression and underscoring a sense of strength and competence in the mover. The two sighted partners continually watch for the ways they might help one another as well, sometimes taking a more primary or more backseat role with regard to the structural support they provide. Above all, they endeavour to listen for the cues of the mover and to uphold his or her desires to manifest the dance as fully as possible. After several

13. Many thanks to my movement partner, Andy Seiler, for articulating his experiences during a studio session in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2009.

minutes of moving together, the sighted partners pull back and witness again from the sidelines, allowing the blindfolded dancer to complete the exploration in their absence and with the lingering memory of their touch.

In response to explorations such as these, of blind-folded contact, dancers often describe an increased sense of 'lushness', recounting an acute awareness of sensation with the filtering of visual stimulus. The movement may feel simultaneously riskier and safer than during eyes-open dancing; as visual orientation becomes unavailable and unnecessary, dancers can find themselves moving more freely and with more keen proprioceptive awareness. Many dancers speak to feelings of liberation, noting that their blindfold has offered a clear signal indicating that others must, to an extent, take care of them, and take responsibility for safety in the space. In addition, however, movers may feel an enhanced experience of vulnerability, which when mindfully attended, can elicit vivid imagery and feelings.<sup>13</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: TAKING THE WORK TO THE WORLD AND THE STAGE**

In my experience, if I am performing well, I am witnessing a moving audience. I am holding the witness role as dancer, the audience is the mover, and I am supporting their journey.

(Olsen 2007: 323)

I have most certainly found the interplay of these practices to benefit those of my students and clients for whom artistic performance is not their orientation. Both Contact Improvisation dance and Authentic Movement facilitate a deep kind of investigation, touching people on kinesthetic, cognitive, emotional, imagistic and spiritual levels; within the safety and stimulation of intimate, partnered engagement, movers may glean a wealth of insight upon reflection on experiences of both limited and heightened sensory experiences. In addition, the reciprocity within the practices – within the roles of mover-witness and of mover-mover – yields particular illumination with regard to relational and interpersonal sensibilities. As a performance improviser, more specifically, however, having engaged over time with practices like these, I observe myself to bring a broader palette of imagery, impulses and deep emotional connection to my work onstage. I note that my colleagues and I may each attend individual, unravelling threads of attention and inquiry, keeping them distinct even as we meet one another in the dance. Simultaneously, we serve one another's investigation, offering the influence, response and support of our bodies and movement choices. This creates a dynamism, immediacy and vitality in our interactions with one another, which can provide a sense of clarity and spaciousness for audience members as well. In this way, they too may be 'touched', invited in to a process of reciprocity, and free to inhabit if not always consciously articulate their own associations and experience.

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## INTERVIEWS

Carter, T. 3 December 2009.

## TEACHING REFLECTIONS

Student Response #1: 16 December 2007, Authentic Movement Eight-Week Group, Stefanie Cohen, facilitator.

Student Response #2: 10 November 2008, Contact Improvisation Workshop, *Listening, Leading and Following*, Stefanie Cohen, teacher.

Student Response #3: 7 December 2009, Authentic Movement On-going Group, Stefanie Cohen, facilitator.

Notes from Studio Session: 7 December 2009, Ann Arbor, MI.

Wasson, A. (1998), Teaching Observation (as program participant) in Contemplative Dance Year-Long Program.

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