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## Agent Provocateur

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# agent provocateur

Vahri McKenzie

*Felix Ruckert, Berlin-based choreographer, recently presented workshops in three Australian cities. Each reflected an aspect of his artistic practice and shared an element of provocation: to the individual participants, to social norms and to what we comfortably understand as contact improvisation.*

## **The Perth workshop: non-traditional approaches to CI**

Ruckert was brought to Perth by STRUT dance to offer *Rituals of Intimacy*, a workshop he describes as non-traditional approaches to contact improvisation. Amongst other things, it is about body fluids and inner waters, where the body's secretions are seen to be associated with emotional states. Somatic explorations are linked with familiar CI techniques. For example, one series starts with eye exercises – eyes are wet and open – then moves into pouring weight. Eyes 'liquefy' – they produce tears – which conjure the sensation of liquefying ones body to pour one's weight smoothly from the floor onto another surface, usually another body. This approach, argues Ruckert, makes the abstract concrete, the impersonal, personal and the purely technical becomes emotional, which aids understanding.

Other activities were more challenging. On the first day we performed a heaviness exercise that involved distributing one's full weight onto the supine body of a partner. This was familiar to me, but the next development was something that I've played with in my contact dances without verbally declaring my intentions. The underneath partner tries to slowly move, roll and escape from the top partner, while the top person moves and rolls in order to stay on top. When I've done this I've (privately) called the game Hop on Pop (after the Dr Seuss story) which for me captures something of its 'dark play' overtones. It is playful, but also powerful: the aim is to remain on top. It is easier

to 'win' with someone bigger underneath and so I've only ever played with a man. This leads me to question my motivations: in not verbally declaring the game am I acknowledging its power-play aspects? In only choosing men to play with am I addressing only physical advantage within the game or social (sexual) context too? I don't know, but this is the kind of tricky question that *Rituals of Intimacy* encouraged me to ask.

## **Sydney and Melbourne workshops: more than CI**

While in Australia, Ruckert also offered workshops as part of Xplore Festival, an 'event on creative sexuality, BDSM, tantra, ritual and other body practices', which he founded in Berlin. These workshops included *Dancing the Whip: Flogging in Movement and Resistance Play*. Unconventional approaches to CI are a staple of the Xplore workshops. Ruckert identifies a link between contact improvisation and his interest in the practice of bondage/discipline/sadism/masochism, centring on clear communication: dance and BDSM are both physical dialogues where skilful non-verbal communication is the key to a successful interaction. He discovered BDSM while researching physical pain for his production *Secret Service* and was attracted to it for its powerful drama. He noted the theatrical power of the victim, who will always draw a viewer's eye, because the victim is so present to the experience of strong emotion. Ruckert likes to work with physical pain because of its immediacy and its connection to the primary emotions. It permits a very direct approach to emotion in general and any workshop that starts with pain, he claims, gets right to fear, sadness and embarrassment.

In *Resistance Play*, Ruckert begins with 'No' activities: resisting, avoiding, pushing, verbally insulting. Participants are given strategies to distinguish between 'a mind "no"' and a 'real "no"'. This method is used because, he argues, it is so much more difficult for us as a culture to say 'no'. We are taught 'yes' first of all. Accurate differentiation is drawn into his approach to contact improvisation. In CI we are taught to do what we like, Ruckert says, but sometimes we are not sure what we like: an experience can fall between yes and no, I like it/I don't like it. The resistance score helps participants to find clarity.

*Sometimes we are not sure what we like: an experience can fall between yes and no, I like it/I don't like it.*

Some may object that this approach is unnecessary and nasty. Who would want to intentionally cause pain, and why? I can think of two possible reasons. Hellen, another Perth participant who entered the *Rituals of Intimacy* workshop with a sense of open curiosity, acknowledged, 'I was not comfortable when I was supposed to hurt and be hurt, but I recognise the importance of that exercise: it was to understand our boundaries and to motivate us for a dance with passion, instinct and feeling.' Hellen identifies a link between her discomfort and the passionate dance that followed, a strong reaction to pain which calls up responses you wouldn't normally see. Like Ruckert she notes the close relationship between internal conflict and drama: emotion is key to each.

Secondly, we do not experience pain in the same way or in the same places. What actually hurts a particular individual is interesting to me, and reminds me of a question I asked David Corbet at my first ACIC: 'How can I dance so that I bruise less?'

He said, 'Your body will learn not to bruise.' I thought he was fobbing me off, but it turned out to be true. Many dancers have a story about the teaching injury, a pain that contributed to moving differently and understanding more about their movement. Using pain to explore our physical limits, to probe them and perhaps move the threshold beyond, is in my view, a legitimate physical practice.

### **Touch and Play: CI or not CI?**

Touch and Play Festival was held for the first time in 2010 at Ruckert's laboratory and performance space in Berlin, Schwelle7. Touch and Play is described as 'exploring the human chemistry in contact improvisation' and is framed as 'research': It aims to tackle Paxton's claim that emotional feelings ought to be set aside to dance CI. One of the creators of this festival, Ruckert says he wants to explicitly pose the question of sexuality in CI. Can it be something useful? This question asks that we distinguish between bodies in the dance space in a way that is normally, wilfully, overlooked.

Within Touch and Play's research-explicit context, last year's festival revealed difficulties for some participants. People came with different expectations: some were shocked; some were unsure about whether the festival was a sex-positive space. Ruckert complains that there is a lack of clarity in the Touch and Play philosophy, which has implications for safety. For example, he says, the promotional material dances around the issue with talk of sensuality, but it does not say, 'We think sex is good. Why not?' One way or the other, it needs to be clear; even the title is unclear, he says: it is a bit sweet and childish. It may be difficult to maintain the supposedly objective pose of research in this area. Alternatively, like much current research in practice-led areas, or practice as research, it may throw the question of supposed objectivity back onto those conducting conventional research.

Pash Galbavy, who wrote about her attitudes towards the alternative views on emotion in CI (<proximity> 9.2), points out in a personal communication that while they ensured the non-codified status of contact improvisation, the founders of the form have been slow to acknowledge the question of emotion in the dance that exists, even if just in shadow-form, for many members of the contact improvisation community.

### **The CI jam and CI in performance: future directions**

Ruckert describes CI jams as a variety of folk dance, with a focus on social inclusivity and conflict avoidance. The jam observes rules and codes of behaviour and doesn't aim to evolve. It is not interesting as performance. Early demonstrations of CI, on the other hand, were very conscious of the audience experience, which is the North American tradition, says Ruckert. They were a display of technical skill, with frequent eye contact and a conscious sense of showing. But now the form has started to stagnate, because it is so comfortable. 'This is not a problem just with CI,' he says. 'I see it with tango and martial arts; it is often a question of resources. But it allows the corruption of the form, so now there needs to be an evolution.' This position raises questions for the future of the social institution of the jam, and for contact improvisation methodology as it relates to performance.

*CI rules are useful and make jams safe places, where we pretend that sex and power don't exist.*

Ruckert says that CI rules are useful and make jams safe places, where we pretend that sex and power don't exist. At the same time, he warns, 'We should remember that CI is a product of the 70s'. The veneer of equality, seen, for example, in the way everyone tends to dress the same way, obscures inequalities, such as that which exists between the strong and weak, and between those with greater and lesser experience. It is in this

space of asymmetrical power relations, he argues, that dramatic art is made.

Ruckert's critique of the contact improvisation jam draws a direct line from practice to performance. Performance is not the aim of most CI jam participants, but perhaps Ruckert's preoccupation with what is interesting to watch can offer a useful analysis of CI as a methodology. Agnes Michelet, director of STRUT dance, points out that artists are rarely thinking about therapy or social effects when making a work. 'Felix Ruckert creates works of art and his workshops and research fit into this. Occasionally this work will cross with other, unforeseen territories, such as what we saw with the Bill Henson issue, so I think the debate [regarding art and social values] isn't settled', Michelet says.

### **The artist and risk: creativity vs. therapy**

Before deciding to do *Rituals of Intimacy*, a member of the Perth CI community wrote an open letter to STRUT dance: 'A number of us from the Perth contact community are concerned about what will happen to the safety of our jam space post this upcoming STRUT workshop. We are also concerned that people experiencing CI for the first time through the Touch and Play philosophy may have a negative experience and therefore not pursue a curiosity for CI that may have led to a greater involvement with the practice and hence contribute toward the growth of the practice in WA.' I do not share these concerns but the workshop was not well attended: was this because others had similar worries?

I asked Agnes Michelet how she responded to these concerns, and to speculate about why STRUT's workshop did not attract more participants. She claims that factors linked to Ruckert's involvement with BDSM groups in Berlin triggered some fears which were not counterbalanced by the fact that his visit was sponsored by the Goethe Institut, the Australia Council and the partnership between STRUT and Critical Path. 'The question of risk is an important one,' Michelet claims. 'We took seriously the concern expressed regarding risk to the dance community.'

*A number of us are concerned about what will happen to the safety of our jam space post this STRUT workshop.*

*Artists pursue risk and unknown territory because innovation doesn't come from what we know.*

I asked Michelet to describe the process STRUT dance undertook to get Ruckert to Perth. 'We heard about Felix Ruckert's work *Ring*, an intimate piece where the audience sits in a circle around the performers and they interact through contact.' Michelet had a chance to meet with him in his space in Berlin and established a relationship. 'It was the work *Ring* that attracted us, because of the way it aligns with STRUT's core values of "innovation, diversity and excellence". *Rituals of Intimacy* fits with what we admired about *Ring*, with the focus on intimacy, touch, sensory experience and inquiry into a performer's relationship with the audience. Also, to end *Rituals of Intimacy* with a free open jam offered a way for the public and the participating artists to experience the dissolving line between artists and audience, which was inherent to the workshop process.' Further conversations with Felix Ruckert and Critical Path reinforced for STRUT that there was no risk to the community in bringing Felix to Perth; on the contrary they sought to expand and enhance the community. 'Artists pursue risk and unknown territory, because innovation doesn't come from what we know,' Michelet says.

In the same way as it is important for an artist to distinguish between a community practice, such as a CI jam, and performance, it is important for a community to distinguish between therapy and creative practice, which can be more expansive. I'm interested in seeing more explicitly therapeutic applications of CI, such as that reported in these pages in *<proximity>* 14.1. Gustavo Lecce worked with sufferers of anorexia nervosa and some were

able to address confused perceptions of body image. I asked Ruckert about therapy and contact improvisation. 'I don't know much about it,' he admitted. 'Therapy is a tricky thing.' But he insists that even in a CI workshop with limited resources there is a space for dark play. 'Any workshop takes you to a dark place, as you are exposed to the gaze of others who will see you and judge you. You will be asked to do things and you won't know what they mean. You will encounter fear and frustration that you can't do things well enough. But you will also have the opportunity in that same workshop to translate fear into pride, joy and empowerment.'

Conversations with Felix Ruckert, research and writing this article prompt me to suggest that there is space in the broad church of CI to accommodate several directions. The jam, with its basically egalitarian and safe environment, ought to be sturdy enough to include new ideas whilst remaining the primary place of regular practice. Explicitly research-oriented approaches to CI (such as Ruckert's) find a place in the many workshops and festivals devoted to CI and related movement practices: I see no reason for a community to be threatened by this. Therapeutic approaches to CI might include work with those with particular needs, or indeed may begin to address the long-maintained taboo around what is euphemistically termed 'chemistry'. All of these approaches may, or may not, include processes that lead to performance outcomes.

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