

Assisted Levitation or the Dissolution of Gravity

In my presentation titled *Assisted Levitation or the Dissolution of Gravity*, I am going to focus on two topics. On the one hand, I would like to introduce you to the concepts, methods, and techniques of **CONTACT IMPROVISATION**, and on the other hand I will report on a series of workshops titled the **SCHOOL OF SENSITIVITY** that I conducted as part of a choreographic project series entitled the **YVES KLEIN TRILOGY**.

As a choreographer, dancer, and dance teacher, I have been interested in a specific form of dance and movement called **Contact Improvisation** for over twenty years. For me, it has lost none of the fascination I felt in 1977 when I was first exposed to it. My curiosity to know more has kept growing. Since it is a continually developing form, there are always exciting discoveries to be made.

Let me begin with a short excursion into history. Between 1962 and 1964, the United States was home to a democratic dance movement, the **JUDSON DANCE THEATER**, that incorporated everyday movements such as walking, sitting, standing and lying into a dance vocabulary. Dancers walked along walls and performed on rooftops. This constituted a radical challenge of conventional notions of what dance is.

Participants of ROBERT DUNN's choreography class such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Elaine Summers, Judith Dunn, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Lucinda Childs and others showed their work at the Judson Memorial Church.

In 1970 Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Douglas Dunn, and Steve Paxton, among others, founded a dance improvisation group, **GRAND UNION**, that was organized as a collective.

In January of 1972, some Grand Union dancers were artists-in-residence at Oberlin College. There, **Steve Paxton** showed a rough dance experiment entitled *MAGNESIUM* with his men's class – a study in dancing, catching, falling and flying. In June 1972, the next public step followed at the John Weber Gallery in New York, where, with colleagues and dancers such as Nancy Stark Smith and Daniel Lepkoff, Steve Paxton performed **CONTACT IMPROVISATIONS**.

FALL AFTER NEWTON was the title of a documentary video in which examples of CI's first ten years of development were shown.

To whet your appetite, I'd like to show you the first two minutes from this film. (sample video)

In the beginning, there were no rules, just physical – in both senses of the word – experiments on phenomena such as **GRAVITY, MOMENTUM, CENTRIFUGAL FORCE, FRICTION, IMPULSE, WEIGHT, MASS, BALANCE, BUOYANCY, LEVERAGE, and PIVOT.**

People who saw the first CI performances over 25 years ago describe it as a mixture of art, sports, the Jitterbug, and making love.

First exercises were devised in this period. In the meantime, an extraordinarily complex vocabulary of movement has developed from this base.

One of the basic exercises is the **SMALL DANCE**, a kind of movement meditation performed standing up, in which the dancers feel the minute motions that are necessary to keep their bodies in balance.

The **ROLLING CONTACT POINT** between two bodies or between bodies and the floor is linear, point for point. (Demonstration)

At each point, the dancer has the option to change the direction of the movement, to do something in this way or that, to continue here rather than there (refer to "choice" in the Alexander Technique)

Just like in couple dancing – and CI could be seen as a variant of such – the most common form is the **DUET**. The difference with CI is that certain male-female role clichés no longer apply. Women dance with women, men touch men, women carry men, leading and following, seduction and devotion alternate, between partners that are equal – dancers and non-dancers.

The dissolution of gender roles was partly intentional, e.g. with Mangrove, a male performance collective from San Francisco. Partly, however, it is inherent in the form itself – it is about two human beings dancing with each other, independent of heterosexual norms.

Some other elements from CI's basic vocabulary:

LISTENING. In the dialog of movements with a partner, it is necessary to listen to one's own body and the physical communication of other bodies. If two people talk at once, constantly sending out signals, communication is difficult. Nevertheless, in a dialog of movements there exist various states in between active and passive, simultaneous sending and receiving, listening and communicating.

Integral components of the form are **CONTACT, COMMUNICATION** between two or more participants, **CLOSENESS**, the permitting of **TOUCHING** and **BEING TOUCHED**.

Contact is established not only through the hands but through the whole body. The various parts of the body can take on supporting or moving functions as equals. The **SUPPORT & MOVER** principle can be applied to the different organs, the body as a whole, or pairs of bodies. (Demonstration)

Besides **STAYING IN FLOW** and **FOLLOWING**, it is also important to work with **RESISTANCE, DISTANCE**, and with **IN & OUT** of Contact, whereby both partners stay in their own flow of movement. In this way, a new, common flow is created. Just as the left and the right hand dance together without constantly touching each other, although each hand is always aware of where the other is.

GRAVITY and **GOOD FLOOR CONTACT** provide two of the most important aids to orientation in dance. It's a good idea to become friends with the floor, for if you want to fly, you have to make sure of a secure **LANDING**.

LEARNING **FALLING** and **ROLLING TECHNIQUES** makes up part of the basic work. Gravity always works from top to bottom, but since dance often involves **ROTATIONS AROUND ALL 3 AXES**, this can lead to occasional **DISORIENTATION**.

It can be extremely helpful to train **PERIPHERAL VISION**. Dancing blindfolded and blocking the sense of hearing with earplugs can also help to heighten the dancer's awareness. When **WORKING UPSIDE DOWN** dancers learn to see the world in a new way, and negative memories deriving from performing cartwheels and handstands as a child dissolve.

Basic exercises also include **WEIGHT TRANSFER, GIVING and TAKING WEIGHT**, and **SHIFTING WEIGHT** within the body, toward the partner or away from him or her. **CONDITIONS OF IMBALANCE** can lead to movement through space.

In general, we can say that one of the most fascinating aspects is achieving a situation in partner work that would be difficult or impossible to reach on one's own, in being **OFF BALANCE**, where the center of gravity is not above the point of stance. (Demonstration)

WORKING WITH BALLS has proven to be an excellent method to teach certain techniques. Each different size ball (26 cm, 60 cm, or 90 cm in diameter) opens up a world of its own and corresponds to a specific level of partner work, namely **FLOOR, BENCH, and TABLE**.

(Demonstration)

The dancers can immediately apply the experiences they gained to working with a partner. Working on balls makes people more rounded and softer.

I specifically developed the work with the small **OVERBALLS** during my work on the **YVES KLEIN CYCLE** (93-96). These were three evening-length and three shorter pieces.

In the fall of 1993, I immersed myself in the world of the French painter and conceptual artist **YVES KLEIN** (1928-1962). Besides his "blue" worlds, fireworks, body imprints, and concepts for a technological Eden, I was particularly interested in the idea of *L'Université de la sensibilité* that he developed together with the German architect Werner Ruhnau.

In April 1994, I taught the first workshop titled **SCHOOL OF SENSITIVITY - THE ROLLING POINT OF CONTACT**.

The balls give very precise feedback regarding the rolling point of contact, and if you fall off, it is most likely not your ball's (partner's) fault.

Areas of the body surrounded by possible taboos in partner work, that are normally avoided like the uncharted areas on a map, can be explored more easily when working with balls.

A technique that works well with balls is experiencing punctual support at all parts of the body and expanding into space from this base of support, i.e. increasing the body's volume rather than to collapse.

Another interesting aspect of working with the balls is observing the interplay between **PERIPHERY AND CENTER**. When resting on the ball with the hips or stomach and initiating movements starting from the center, the movement spreads to the periphery - the extremities, the head, and the tailbone.

On the other hand, pushing and pulling movements of the extremities influence the movements at the center. (Demonstration)

The principles of developmental movements from Body Mind Centering lend themselves to use here.

Another issue explored in the School of Sensitivity was: **IS BODYWORK PERFORMABLE?**

How can I give someone **TREATMENT**? When I manipulate my partner, I generate **ACTION**.

What happens when I "bodypulate" or "pedipulate" my partner instead of manipulating him or her?

On what level does the touching take place?

In the air above the body landscape,

on the textile level,

on the skin,

in the skin,

do I trace the bone structure or the muscles?

Do I touch with a certain intention, a direction, or

with an empty touch?

Do I encounter my partner within the same system - i.e. bone to bone, muscles to muscles, skin to skin, eye to eye, tooth to tooth – or with another system?

This is a profound exploration of what the human body and being human is about.

The question: "Is bodywork performable?" can not be answered with a clear yes or no. In bodywork the focus is often directed inward, but if the performers manage to keep up a certain intensity of presence, the exploration is characterized by physical and spatial clarity, and the audience is taken along on the journey of exploration rather than left behind, the answer is yes.

I would also like to mention a short **Exercise in perception**: the touching of skin to skin of the forearms and hands, whereby two people work together. One of them touches, the other lets him- or herself be touched. First, person A touches person B in order to feel him or herself, then in order to feel the other. Then the roles are reversed. Participants have about one minute for each exercise – a very short time, but enough to feel a difference.

Another theme in the School of Sensitivity dealt with **ASSISTED LEVITATION**. While researching the material on Yves Klein I came across painting titles such as **PEOPLE BEGIN TO FLY**. One chapter had the heading: **ASSISTED LEVITATION**. The principle of SUPPORT & MOVER and certain aspects of bodywork, when used with creativity and imagination, are ideal for an interpretation of this title in movement.

I began taking **WATSU** lessons. Water shiatsu is a method developed by Harold Dull in the United States (from about 1983 on). For me, there is a strong connection between this method and the Assisted States of Imbalance. This work is performed in chest-deep, warm water.

One experiences the buoyancy of the water as a force that counteracts gravity, so that one is floated in the water while the partner is supporting one's neck and sacrum.

One hears the intestines working and the heart beating.

After a while, you will begin to feel wonderfully safe and supported. A tiny step between complete passivity and the active encounter of touch.

Assisted Levitation can be transferred to work on land as well. The sense of movement gained in the water can be applied to movement development and in the encounter with a partner. It also is well-suited to working with balls.

In their theories on the **ARCHITECTURE OF AIR** and on a **TECHNOLOGICAL EDEN**, Klein and Ruhnau seek to establish an environment in which a creative exchange between free human beings becomes possible.

The main underlying theme in my stage works, in the School of Sensitivity, and also in CI is how communication can function.

It is not enough to demonstrate how communication can go wrong, how people tug at each other, as happens in many stage and dance productions. At the risk of seeming nostalgic or romantic, it is important to develop ideas and alternatives on how communication **can** function.

Working and dealing with people should always be characterized by **RESPECT**. An Asian master once said to me: RESPECT never hurt anyone.

TRUSTING in yourself and in your partner is very important.

Up to now, I have dealt mostly with physical terminology and the basic vocabulary. But a decisive factor for many who practice CI, besides the technical and physical aspects, is the **EMOTIONAL** element, the **JOY OF MOVEMENT, THE MOTIVATION TO MOVE**.

After bones, muscles, and skin, let's look at another important system:
the **ORGANS**

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As we all know, the organs are deeply connected to the emotions.
Let's take the heart as an example.

The **HEART** generally stands for love, tenderness, but also for aggression, rage and many other emotions.

BLOOD, the juice of life that the heart pumps through our arteries and veins, delivers oxygen to our cells.

Arterial and venous blood have very different properties – from rhythmic pulsation to venous ebb and flow.

Movements can be initiated from any part of the body (refer to Body Mind Centering), and the heart is no exception. We can contact this organ by visualizing the heart (location, size, volume, consistence) and incorporating breathing. It is even possible to move the heart through the power of imagination (e.g. rotation around the three axes) and movements affecting the entire body can be initiated from the heart.

Let's explore another aspect of the heart:

The **FOUR DIRECTIONS OF THE HEART** can give a dancer impulses for movement in encounters with his or her partner.

1. OPENNESS

Look around you. How many labels have you mentally attached to the people in the room?

Try to look at the others around you, their appearance, height, skin color, eyes, hair, without automatically judging and evaluating them. Just perceive the differences between them. Observe the details.

2. EMPATHY

This is not to be confused with sympathy or the Good Samaritan syndrome, where one cares so much about and for other people that one loses touch with oneself. How can I support someone if I don't know where my own support is?

3. AFFECTION

For me, affection has something to do with leaving the vertical and finding a common center.

4. LOVE

Here we go the gamut from floating to flying high to crash landings –after all, that's why we spoke about techniques for rolling.

The exercise **EMBRACING DUETS** can be profitably expanded to include things like clinches, strangleholds, pulling hair, biting, kicking, and hitting – all affectionately, of course. After all, pain and desire lie very close together.

Dancing has many colors. It is not an anemic pastime, but one that gets our blood boiling.

Dancing with passion.
Who could say no?

Accepting the unexpected. Not planning, just letting things happen. Experiencing new situations while body surfing exerts a strong fascination for the participants. Adrenaline and endorphin generate exhilaration and excitement.

Risk taking in combination with awareness.
Everyone is responsible for him- or herself and should care for his own state of being and that of others.

How we deal with closeness and distance also has a direct effect on how we deal with **SEXUALITY**, not sidestepping it or even cutting it out altogether, but confronting it head on.

In 1996 **CONTACT QUARTERLY**, a magazine for CI and other forms of movement, devoted two issues to the topic: **SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY**.

The School of Sensibility also dealt with this topic by means of the following exercise:

For this **NO/YES** exercise two people sit facing each other. One touches the other with his or her hand. The person being touched removes the hand, either after a while or immediately, and says NO. In this context, no means “no, thank you, not right now, maybe later but not now.” She/he sets a clear boundary. After that the two repeatedly reverse roles. During the course of the exercise they might notice that they want to say yes. “Yes, I want to be touched.” They say no anyway. Let yourself be surprised about how the exercise continues, how far you go when the space is opened or if the touch is not only through the hands.

Participants often find that talking or writing about their experiences supports the learning process, not only at the end of the exercise.

Sexuality is a part of us and we take it along with us wherever we go, also into dance.

It can be a great source of energy that we can learn to harness. Energy that we can transform and that we can use to increase our own vitality.

After a long, passionate session of dancing, the participants are often drenched with sweat, exhausted but happy.

At the end of my presentation, I have **one last exercise** for you:

This time, take the person on the other side of you as your partner.

Let the tips of your index fingers touch each other and close your eyes.

This is neither an exercise in finger-wrestling nor a Rolling Point of Contact, but a channel through which information can be transferred.

Possibly, movement will appear.

If both of you have the impulse to follow, that's fine.

Don't plan, just let the movement happen.

Enjoy. You have two minutes time for the exercise.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Closing statement:

Thinking in terms of movement is a very complex matter, as, I assume, has become evident at this symposium.

With the right amount of imagination, movement can be thought up in a wide variety of ways.

An idea becomes movement, concepts are implemented, vibrations become visible, even tangible.

Proximity, density leads to poetry, to movement haikus.

Thinking bodies, body knowledge.

Thinking not only with one's head, but with one's very being, with one's cells. Information transfer between cells, groups of cells, organs, bodies, people and organizations.

Going online, connecting to the "universal Internet", out of body experiences, grand masters of meditation on spiritual journeys.

In teaching, setting pedagogical and artistic goals, possibly restructuring thought, taking detours in order to experience magical moments.

Imparting ideas in the choreographic process and implementing them creatively in dance.

Travelling through time and space in a dancer's body.

Thinking in movement is also thinking politically.

A movement grows, albeit very slowly sometimes.

Models in contemporary dance that were thought up ten or more years ago suddenly become concrete.

Thinking Movement

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Dieter Heitkamp