

Respecting Boundaries / Coexisting Genders

Women's Experiences of Feeling Unsafe in
Contact Improv

Introduction

The intimacy of contact improvisation (CI) can provide nourishment for a soul that is hungry for connection, expression, and healing community. But not everyone experiences this intimacy as a purely wholesome thing. Over the nearly 10 years I have practiced the form, I have repeatedly heard stories from women who have expressed feeling uncomfortable on the dance floor and in the community, especially with men who overstep intimacy, bringing unwanted sexual energy into the connection.

Sexual energy is a natural and beautiful part of the human experience. This initiative is not intended to shame anyone for experiencing sexual energy in their body or feeling attraction for other people. The issue is not the existence of sexuality, but whether/how/when it is expressed. The issue is consent.

In theory, there are no gendered roles in CI. Women, men, trans people and those who do not identify on the gender binary can dance with whomever they want. Similarly, it is theoretically true that anyone can have their boundaries

crossed in CI, regardless of gender. However, the stories that I hear over and over again come from women who feel uncomfortable with men, so this zine will focus on that dynamic.

In my conversations with male dancers, I have heard some of them say that a woman is responsible for asserting her boundaries, and that she is free to leave a dance at any time, for any reason. These are good reminders, but the testimonies in this collection suggest that this approach is not enough. In the end, it takes two to tango. Men also have a responsibility to be aware of how their own energies, intentions, and actions may impact women on the dance floor.

The intention of this collection is to share women's stories with the CI community, so that these experiences can be heard and honoured. With greater awareness of others' experiences, we can become more conscious of how this dynamic plays out on the dance floor, and together we can work towards changing the culture of our community to make it a safer space for women.



Ming Mei Ip

I know when it's happening. When I'm a prey. I used to lie to myself about it. Pretend like I was dumb. How foolish of me. The lies I tell myself. It's easy that way. There's a lot of me dancing away, rolling out, not totally giving in, not totally quitting out. Secretly knowing, not out loud, hiding the "plaisir" of being desired behind the veil of innocence. I don't have to make a choice. Nobody taught me to make that choice, or that there even was a choice to be made. I figured it out on my own. Rather, I let my body find its way to integrity and truth in the dance.

Touch sensation doesn't simply involve skin in contact with skin, as a purely material phenomenon. I can sense intention in the touch. And sometimes that intention isn't aligned or compatible with mine, my senses tell me so. After the passive/pretending phase, I went through a period of disgusted avoidance phase. But that shit quickly got stale, and neither of us were getting better at coexisting as human beings, humans dancing. Inspiration happens sometimes when we stop trying, when we stop resisting and labeling. Especially when the old ways don't serve no more. Time to move forward. Time for this body to feel something new. To re-actualize the me. To watch and learn.

Jam. Stranger. Touch. Sensation. Intention. Uh-oh. Predator. Eww. Flight... or fight? Choice! Dance! Worst thing that can happen, I will learn something about myself. Best case scenario, this fellow might learn to see beyond the penis-vagina paradigm. Discomfort. Lots of it to dance with. I let my body communicate that. Elbows are involved. Frontality and stubbornness. I feel strong. My bones are strong. I'm skinny but sharp. I am centered. Self-centered in consciousness.

My hands grab before he can. There is no resentment in the moving, no shame in me being. I let him shy away his flirt. He's trying to catch a butterfly with a hole in his net. But I'm not a butterfly, those shoulders aren't picking me up. I'm not sweet or clueless. My lasered moves break the game and colour outside the lines. I'm rewriting the story of princess playing hard to get and mr. charming getting what he wants. It's a satire I believe, because we still need to have fun and play with the social seriousness of it all. A dance of resistance + empowerment + compassion. Good recipe for new pathways. Oh and presence and observation of course!! He surrenders. Finally, Victory! We dance beyond our conditioning. Our humanities meet for a moment, no more hunting for today. Poor guy is now vegan. But that's another story for a noble cause.

Kinga Michalska

I am an experienced contact dancer and I am fully committed to this practice. It has and continues to change my life for the better and I am deeply grateful that I came across it. Amongst plenty of beautiful, transformative dances and great community support, I also see a shadow there that bothers me greatly and makes me less and less excited to partake in it and makes me uncomfortable to encourage new people to join this practice. I think that we have to face it and grow as a community and make our practice a safer space.

Sometimes I wish that I had one spectacular story to share that would shine as a perfect example of where my fears and insecurities come from. Fortunately or not, I don't have it.

What I do have are many ambiguous moments of feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, threatened, and confused on a dance floor or in a contact improv event.

I started contact dancing when I was 20. Especially in the beginning, being a young, conventionally attractive, inexperienced woman, I came across all sorts of situations where men were manipulating my body to receive physical or visual sexual pleasure from it. To name a few common contact moves, I had dances where men would repeatedly spread my legs into splits to either see or feel my crotch on their bodies, many times men would insist on squeezing me between their legs or causing a situation where we would end up in a scissoring position. I am also not a big fan of men sitting on my back (legs open) – especially if they have big holes in their pants and no underwear. Yes, that happened! It was also common for men to stretch my body in a way that my breasts would pop up in their face, as well as to give me a bit too many “accidental” touches on them. Another position that some men like a lot would be when a guy is standing behind me, lifts me up, spreads my legs, puts my crotch at his crotch and holds me by my forearms. I guess I should feel like a movie star from *Dirty Dancing* or *Titanic*. Instead I feel helpless and embarrassed.

I know that all this can happen accidentally and that beginners are often clumsy, awkward and confused about transitions. My last wish would be to shame someone who did this by mistake and quickly moved to something else. I am talking about cases when those moves are repeated many times in one dance or even become a style of an experienced dancer. Over the last 5 years of a regular practice I have noticed that there are men in my community who almost exclusively dance with new young women and use those moves more than any others. I also think that it is possible that



Oh nooooo... not again..



some women enjoy this kind of dancing and I don't judge that. I personally like sexy dancing too, just not in a contact context. Since it's a silent practice based on touch it is hard to give verbal consent. What I am questioning the most is whether it is fair to make this kind of dance an introduction to contact for anyone. Is this really representative to what contact improv is? I would like to believe that it's not. I wish for new people, especially women, but also queer, trans, POC folks, and disabled people to be greeted warmly and safely and to be looked after by the community.

Aside from the ambiguous dances, there is the whole other set of physical interactions that happen at contact events like massages, cuddle puddles, extended hugs, naked swimming and sauna hangouts. Those can be really beautiful, bonding and healing. But they can also feel really shitty when unwanted sexual energy is brought up.

I had massage therapists offer me massages that focused a lot on my ass or were ambiguously coming way too close to my breasts even though I said my shoulders were hurting. I think that if a masseuse wants to go for the private parts – they have to ask. As a young person I would often try to find excuses for their behaviour and think that since they're professionals, they must be doing things right. Bullshit.

Same thing with cuddle puddles, many times things seemed really sweet and innocent and then I found someone's hands travelling around my body in a disturbingly ambiguous way even though I thought I was not sending this person any verbal or physical signals of a sexual nature.

I have also had a man kiss me on the cheek when I was sleeping outside of the dance floor at a contact event. I hardly knew him and was not into any physical contact with him

or anyone at that moment. It bothered me, but I didn't say anything cuz I thought maybe I was too sensitive. Today I think that I wasn't. I believe that it is a pretty sane thing to say that people shouldn't kiss or touch strangers when they are sleeping.

There was also a man at a contact festival who came to me as I was talking to someone, didn't even say hi or anything, but reached for my shirt and put a flyer underneath it. He turned around and went away with a huge smile, leaving me with a jaw wide open from astonishment.

Not to say that it's only men who are projecting things on women. I also had another woman touch my ass quite a lot, but we talked about it, she's never done it again and we're still good friends.

Another time I was feeling really overwhelmed at a jam and went outside of the room to take a moment to be alone. As I was walking in the corridor, I came across someone who I hardly know who hugged me really strongly. I told him that I wasn't feeling like being touched at that moment. He said: "What are you doing at a contact jam than?"

I ask myself this question quite often. Is there a place in the contact community for people to be by themselves? Are we by entering a contact event committing to potentially being touched by everyone at all times? Is there space for verbal consent in contact? How can we go about that so that we don't "break the magic" of the dance?

I recognize that I am speaking from a privileged position of a person who is young, conventionally attractive, experienced dancer and has a lot of physical contact in her life outside of CI. I can imagine that for people who don't have that,

CI may seem like a good doorway to sexual intimacy that they're lacking in life. If there are women who want to give that - that's great. What I do not agree with is to do things that come from a place of guilt, obligation or politeness that is compromising women's safety. When I am in a situation that is making me uncomfortable with a person that I consider less privileged, a common thought that I have is: "I must keep dancing with this man, he's old and maybe lonely, I don't want to hurt his feelings, I don't want to be judgemental. Maybe I am projecting my worries and his intentions are pure? I am not open enough. I should just accept him the way he is."

With more experience I discovered that I don't have to have those dances and I found my ways to stay away from them. I spend a lot of my time and energy manoeuvring around people who I feel unsafe around. The way I have come to deal with this stuff is to avoid certain men that I had such experiences with or that I observed have a tendency to bring sexual energy into the dance a lot. But this is not enough. I don't know what's the solution but just avoiding those dances is giving permission for this dynamic to exist. I know a lot of new women who come to try CI, get an experience like that and never come back. That makes me really sad. I think that talking about sexuality and consent should be a part of CI training. I think that teachers are responsible to bring up questions about emotional safety and consent. I have taken many classes and workshops in Europe and North America and never had that in class unless someone brought it up in a closing circle and even then not given much importance.

For now, since not many people are teaching this, here is some advice that I could offer to those who struggle with the same problem as I do. For example, changing the dynamic of a dance has been really helpful. If rolling with some-

one gets sticky, I get up, speed up and redirect the energy. Even though I really like slow, meditative movement, I often lean towards dynamic dances to lower the risk of someone's sexual energy being imposed on me. Another one, more hard to do I find, is to pause the dance and check in with my partner when I find their intentions unclear – just simple “how are you doing?” or “how do you find our dance so far?” can give them an opportunity to express their feelings of attraction or discomfort and for me to share where I'm at. Obviously we are at all times allowed to leave the dance without explaining ourselves.

The important thing is not to put all of the responsibility on women. When I share those situations with friends I often hear: “If you were uncomfortable, why didn't you say anything?” Well. I am shy, socially conditioned to be polite and submissive towards men. It took me years of unlearning to be able to speak up. Please don't shame or guilt people who can't speak up. Maybe in the first place they shouldn't have been put in a situation to need to react? If you see something or hear a story like that, offer your help. Ask first; don't assume that they need it unless they told you so.

All that being said, I want to highlight that I think that arousal and sexual energy are natural and healthy things for people to experience and no one should feel guilt for having them. The issue that I am addressing is what do we do with it in the contact improv context? To my mind, a person who is experiencing it absolutely has to ask consent before acting upon it. If they decide not to talk, I think it's a good idea to meditate on it and not feed into it, if it's too strong and they are unsure about the other person's feelings I think they should leave the dance. Another good idea is to have designated spaces where people can explore contact and sexuality, like Touch and Play Festival. I also think that it's great to bring

contact to our bedrooms, but not the other way round. I believe that contact has a great potential to be a gender-neutral space, or at least free of many conventional gender roles. Most women are able to lift men, initiate and lead a dance. There are a lot more same sex dances in contact than in any other partner dance that I know of. I believe that by consciously cultivating this potential we can make CI spaces more safe and welcoming for women and marginalized groups.

Anonymous "B"

- 1 -

I don't like being lifted constantly in a dance. I also want to be a support.

- 2 -

There is a man who is often at the jam. He is very nice to me, maybe even a little too nice. I don't really like dancing with him, because I always feel sexual energy in the dance. There's been times when he's told me things about his sex life, comparing them to our dance, and I find that very inappropriate. But in the moment, not wanting to seem closed-minded, I pretended to find it interesting. I still try to be nice with him so he doesn't feel rejected, but I prefer to not dance with him.

One day, I went to say hello to him because it had been a long time since I'd last seen him. I didn't want to touch him, but I felt like I was obligated to for him to feel okay. So I put

my hand on his shoulder, but he came closer and kissed my face. This made me feel very uncomfortable. Not knowing what to do, I smiled.

I felt like he was happy to see me, and I didn't want to disappoint him, so I offered to dance with him. After all, I told myself, we were there to dance. I didn't really want to though, because I suspected that I wouldn't enjoy dancing with him. And I was right, I didn't like it, because his sexual energy was there again. I even felt like this time he touched more intimate parts of my body on purpose. I stopped the dance fairly quickly.

When he left the jam, he said goodbye by putting his hand on his heart and gazing at me lovingly. I felt disgusted, but still I smiled back. Why was I not able to respect myself in this situation? Why did this man behave like that with me? Maybe because I am a young woman and he is an older man, I told myself. Maybe because of the way we were educated to behave. Did he really think I was interested in him? Was he trying to seduce me? In any case, this experience has restricted my feeling of freedom and removed my desire to dance.

- 3 -

I am a young woman. Other women almost never come to dance with me, especially not the experienced female dancers. It's always men who offer to dance, and I think that this is part of a pattern of behaviour that makes gender dominant in jams and sexualizes bodies and expression through movement.

Three Stories by "C"

- 1 -

"Those might have been the best five minutes of my life. Wouldn't it be incredible if we could do this everyday?" he asked. I shared the elation for the fully embodied dance we'd just brought to an end, my first and last of the long weekend's jam, having frustratingly felt blocked by my fears of corporeal incompetence for the entirety of the days preceding.

"Where are you based? I can travel," he continued. I felt momentary apprehension at the thought of being followed, of the stranger with whom I'd just shared a wonderful dance attempting to perpetuate the intensity of our athletic experience off the dancefloor. I attempted to excuse myself to dry off by half-jokingly saying I didn't want to shower him with the sweat our physical efforts had generated, to which this elderly gentleman several decades my senior replied that "it'd be the best shower [he'd] ever have."

With intent to promptly conclude the increasingly uncomfortable exchange and depart, I reflexively leaned forward to kiss this person's cheek farewell, as is custom in my culture, at which point I unexpectedly felt my earlobe enter into his mouth. Too taken by surprise to verbally respond, I ran off, shaken by this man's forwardness and revolted by his advances. I spent the entirety of the closing circle that immediately ensued attempting to salvage the good feelings about the jam I'd finally been able to garner before the aforementioned exchange took place, in the midst of all the anger, frustration and disgust it engendered. I resolved to overcome my conflict aversion and confront this man at the

circle's close, letting him know I'd appreciated our dance but that if I was to feel safe ever improvising with him in the future, he had to know my intentions were to connect exclusively within the context of Contact on the dancefloor - I was just here to dance, I affirmed. He politely, if disappointedly, heard me and agreed to respect my boundaries, or so I hoped to have heard.

As per the site's protocol, everyone was to help clean the place up after our final meal, and during this time, everyone also took the opportunity to repeatedly embrace one another au revoir. I inadvertently though unavoidably bumped into this man in the process, amicably if overly politely agreed to hug him farewell, and once again, felt the moist interior of his aged mouth envelop the edges of my earlobe.

- 2 -

The following letter was sent to a regional contact jam's conflict mediation committee to address a boundary-crossing issue that arose between a local participant that had offered to host out-of-town attendees and two of his guests. Names have been changed to protect the identities of the people involved.

Dear 'Conflict Mediation Committee',

Thank you all for the sincere care and support you have shown and provided in addressing this sensitive situation. I am the woman who experienced difficulty with unclear intention underlying intimate touch in the home setting.

I would first like to say that Mark was an extremely hospitable host and that I have been feeling great unease at the prospect of confrontation undermining the gratitude we col-

lectively shared for the home he provided for us - a perspective which unfortunately lies at the root of my issue, i.e., the difficulty I experienced in expressing myself at the time the situation arose.

To clarify, our ride-sharing group arrived at Mark's Friday evening and I was too tired to accompany the others to go out dancing, electing instead to remain in the home with our host and his platonic female friend so that I'd be well rested for the weekend of dancing ahead. Our conversation revolved around our respective relationships - romantic & platonic - and at it's conclusion, the two of them were going to cuddle on the couch before saying their farewells. The female friend kindly, inclusively asked if I would like to join. I consented and comfortably lay in embrace with them both. When the female friend rose to depart, she suggested that Mark work on the shoulder I had mentioned was painning me and I gratefully accepted the massage and remained where I was. We were now alone in the home.

Mark generously worked on my shoulder with the hand closest to it, but as time passed, I noticed what felt like the trembling fingers of his other hand inching closer to the edge of my breast. A great amount of anxiety arose within me, accompanied by a desire to trust my host and a hopeful denial that his intentions would be to touch me inappropriately. I felt paralyzed by the ambiguity, my fatigue and vulnerability - and fearful of confrontation with the person who had until this point shown me nothing but warm welcome.

My friends entered the home shortly thereafter and I seized the opportunity to follow them to bed, to remove myself from an increasingly, uncomfortably unclear situation, thanking Mark for the massage on my way out. He thanked me for our connection and went to bed.

On the Saturday night, people drifted upstairs to sleep and out to eat and I, who had elected to eat in, once more found myself alone in the kitchen with Mark. We conversed about consent, at which point he mentioned that he appreciated "kind & honest communication" around boundaries, that just because a hypothetical someone was "hungry for what you got" did not make them a bad person, that the difficult thing about asking for consent was that "sometimes you feel like a bad person just for asking" & subsequently inquired about my experience with him on the couch.

I at this time diplomatically if nervously responded that the massage had been much appreciated but that his other wandering hand had made me nervous as it inched seemingly closer to my breast. He said he had been aware that it was on the edge and had enjoyed it. I wasn't quite sure how to respond and again, my friends entered the home shortly thereafter, allowing me to end what for me had become a difficult conversation.

A comment around proposed fatherhood arose when I was expressing a difficult emotional experience I'd lived earlier in the day, concerning my own oft tumultuous relationship with my father, at which point he, with presumably caring & hospitable intent, offered to "be my father" - as he had done for the fatherless best friend of his own son. This, in and of itself, did not particularly bother me - except that upon our departure, he told me I could always reach out if ever I needed anything, be it a father, a massage or a breast grope. I believe this was said with humor, though it sits with me oddly and I am accordingly unsure as to what hospitality I would feel comfortable receiving from this person in the future.

Had Lucie, the other guest who experienced an uneasy moment with Mark, not specifically inquired about my experience with our host on our drive home, I likely would have kept it to myself, as a difficult reminder of my increasing need to learn how to be more verbally expressive about my boundaries when they are being crossed. However, the baseline parallels in our experiences, having both been offered shoulder massages to which we consented and subsequently undergone touch encroaching on more intimate areas of our bodies, without having been asked for consent, brought an issue greater than just my own to light and we agreed it warranted a conversation such that the situation not reproduce itself in the future, with other guests.

On the one hand, I feel I have already had a conversation with Mark about our experience (on the Saturday night) and on the other, feel guilt for not having been as authentic about my discomfort as I could have been, had I not been so focused on smoothing out the situation so we could all enjoy our experience during the jam.

The main point that I find retrospectively difficult to digest, is that if one/Mark fears being perceived as a bad person for asking for consent for a specific action, then the appropriate course of action should NOT be to skip the asking and perform the act anyway. It is always good practice to ask, but ESPECIALLY so if you suspect the person might be averse to the act, i.e., "think you are a bad person for asking". I would appreciate if this were raised in the conversation to be had with Mark.

Thank you all for the space you've offered to help process this experience and address the issues it's highlighted in an open-hearted, non-judgmental & constructive manner. My appreciation is endless.

The room was dimly lit, the dancers as of yet floorbound, individually grounding and warming up for the weekly late evening jam. I found a small space against the far wall along which to do the same, and I quietly lay, closing my eyes, slowly softening into the floor.

Much to my surprise and initial distaste, I suddenly felt a few fingers start to crawl onto my face. It must be Madeleine, wanting to play - I'd spotted her across the room when I'd arrived and had not yet been over to say hello. I could only imagine she, with her oft childlike playfulness, would be the one to enter my unassuming space as I personally prepared to participate; she'd repeatedly expressed how important respecting boundaries were to her, so I accepted her unexpected, if otherwise premature, engagement as safe, without opening my eyes.

I allowed this hand to remain on my face without mobilizing the rest of my body to meet the engagement - I wasn't yet ready to dance and I was working on not compromising on that self-care front.

The fingers moved onto my lips, a place I am quite averse to having other people's fingers be, and they didn't feel like the fingers of a young woman - Madeleine must have picked up someone else's hand and orchestrated its exploration of my laying face, I rationalized.

I wasn't feeling particularly confrontational and eventually elected to humor her efforts by pressing my hand into the other one, to leverage myself into a more able position, incorporate this person, who surely must be a mutual friend,

into my increasingly mobile warm-up, and of course, remove their fingers from my mouth. I kept my eyes closed, I wasn't yet ready to socialize.

I found responding to the other person's movements in the ways I'd been taught kept landing me in positions I felt were unusually intimate, and I alternately kept pressing into our point of contact to spin out from it, as a means of achieving a distance from which to dance at which I felt safer. Slow-movement was generally something I was comfortable with but coupled with our bizarrely repetitive entanglement, it came to border on a sensuality I was not at peace with, and too nervous was I gradually becoming to open my eyes and discover the identity of this increasingly encroaching other.

At moments, the dancer would mobilize our bodies such that my pelvis would end up straddling his, which I would rapidly, if flusteredly, work to reconfigure; at others I'd notice our frictional rolling would raise the lower part of my shirt, and his hands would begin to caress my bare midriff. Who in the world could I possibly be dancing with, that would consider our pre-existing level of closeness such that any of these actions would be acceptable? We were on a public dancefloor, after all, and if my own level of personal insecurity wasn't enough to wrest me from inaction, my growing embarrassment finally was.

In a moment where I found myself uncomfortably pinned underneath this dancer, I finally apprehensively peeled the lids of my eyes apart, and came to behold the identity of this other was one utterly unknown to me - I was, in quite a vulnerable configuration, staring into the face of an older man I had never before seen, and I was horrified.

I looked off to the side, and saw that Madeleine had never

left the part of the room I'd initially sighted her on - she'd had nothing to do with the "dance" I currently felt entrapped in. Within closer reach, I sighted familiar dancing bodies and reflexively extended a limb to make contact and organically transition out of my predicament.

Instead, a third ended up enmeshed into our disastrous duo, but wasted little time in removing herself from what she quickly ascertained was an unacceptable level of intimate tactility, leaving me once anew alone with my perpetrator. I felt paralyzed in my intent to disengage, ashamed for the length of time during which I'd already allowed these repeated violations to persist, under the dissociating denial that they could possibly be occurring and the hopeful illusion that only someone I knew and trusted would allow themselves to engage me whilst I lay in a corner with my eyes closed.

I finally found enough of my voice to feign needing to use the restroom and managed to escape, in confusion, shock and disbelief at what had managed to transpire in a community place I had hitherto unquestionably considered safe.

Anonymous "D"

when i first started dancing
contact, i dreamt that he was
sharing in a circle saying:
*there is never anything sexual
in my dances with women*

as he spoke
a snake came hissing and dancing
out of his unzipped pants.



Anonymous "E"

he is wearing voluminous grey sweatpants and when I sense it, at first i am not sure - it's my first jam, i am not trained as a dancer, there is so much new information

i am newborn, see, i am in a flood of data, of proprioception, of touch, of proximity and orientation, and now, he just had to come over, and i just had to be off guard enough and courteous enough, i just had to be trained many years to be off guard enough and complying enough and courteous enough and

i am no longer just my body moving through space, but 'we', instantly. 170 pounds of middle aged man attached to me, made beneficent by this ordained space of dance - he is touching me, he is on top of me, he pulls himself under me, and it is clumsy and slow and i feel that this is just the awkwardness innate in practice and watch to not put too much weight on him, watch not to hurt myself, watch not to bump into others

and so at first i am not sure, in this new flood of movement and disorientation if it is really happening that i feel something sharp as we dance

i am not sure but again he is pressed into me, and i am all of a sudden frozen and yet still moving

i keep moving because i cannot be sure, and surely he wouldn't continue, and surely i would embarrass him, and surely men can't help it, and surely i could overreact and

i don't even remember how it ends but surely i said thank

you like a nice female assigned person does but i didn't go back. 5 years later and it still takes me three weeks of deliberately leaving the house, taking the metro across town to go to the open jam, before I can actually enter the room without changing my mind on the way to go home again

E also wished to include the following correspondence:

Editor's response:

Thank you for taking the time to write this. Thank you for sharing your experience...

It makes me very sad to read it. Even that first day dancing with you, I remember how sensitive and natural you were in the form, how carefully you listened with your body. And now reflecting on that I realize how it must have been even more shocking for a carefully listening body to experience what you experienced.

And I'm angry at the man who made it so you didn't feel comfortable to come back. I wish there were more people like you in the community, people who listen carefully with their body. I would like for supports and containers to be there so that people, women especially, new dancers especially, can feel as safe and supported as possible, so that they keep coming back. I hope the zine is a step towards that.

Reading your share, I noticed that you didn't explicitly say what "it" is in the first sentence, or the "something sharp" later on. I know what it is because you told me. He had an erection, and he was pressing it against your body. I wonder if some people might not realize it if it isn't stated explicitly,

and it could be powerful to name it. What do you think?

E's reply:

Yes very fine to include it. Not sure how or where.

Thanks for what you wrote. It's funny hearing your remembrance of me, because when I think back on that day, what I remember of myself is this paralysis and that strange phenomenon of being panicked and wholly uncomfortable while outwardly calm. It's a brittle feeling, and a feeling of dense air, containment and pressure and emptiness, layering on other experiences of non consensual touch that push me out of my body, that estrange me to myself.

I would want other dancers to realize the socio political contexts we move through, that the air is thick with. namely that white men have been entitled to brown peoples bodies and women's bodies in disgusting ways throughout history up to present. And queer and trans* folks and people of colour are constantly barraged by violence against their embodiment. The contact jam space is super white and it also weirds me out that there are these known "predator" type folks that are making people feel unsafe but there's no accountability ...?

Unfinished thoughts - or maybe better said, ongoing conversations :) Thanks for putting this together.

La Maga

I have felt abused and trapped during contact-improv jams.
I have felt my dignity drop into their dirty hands.

You might think that being taller, heavier and being a man means that you need to CONTROL, LIFT or DIRECT me.

Don't.

I don't need your possessive hands all over.
I don't need your sexual energy.

What I do need is a rupture in the ongoing SEXIST and OPPRESSIVE behaviours that you are perpetuating and that are indeed present in this context.

Contact-improv can be an empowering space and tool to redefine "partner" dances and gender roles. So let's make it a safer space:

RESPECT. EXCHANGE. LESS HANDS.
QUESTION YOUR WAYS.

Anonymous "F"

- 1 -

I started dancing after a brain injury. The health system had considered me "without need of accompaniment." In the process of waiting for services, my condition worsened to the point where I couldn't walk for more than 5 minutes with very slow steps. My health was globally affected, and social isolation descended upon me. After a year of living with limited autonomy, a stranger offered to accompany me to get my body moving again, and I experienced for the first time a kind of assisted self-healing process. To my great surprise, I succeeded in moving in a variety of ways, with kindness, curiosity, fun, and exploration of movement together.

On my quest to recover my autonomy and joy in life, I discovered contact improv dance, a powerful way to redevelop my balance, my reflexes, the possibility to move freely, and the sense of well-being to be in positive human connection. However, it also confronted me with something unexpected: how to react, express myself, and orient to uncontrolled, obsessive sexual energy that some men brought into contact. Faced with this situation with certain men, I frequently abstained from participating in classes, which became a source of anxiety that I couldn't manage, for fear of being trapped in an experience that I did not want. It is sad that despite my urgent need to improve my state of health, due to this concern I could not benefit as much as I wished from the healing potential of contact improv dance. The most difficult and traumatizing experience I had took place last winter after I had recovered my autonomy of movement and a certain self-confidence. It clearly revealed to me how in a space of improvisation, I was lacking the skills and experience to know how best to respond to unwanted propositions.

At first, I was with a marvelous, playful partner! We had done the class before the jam and had been particularly playful to be in improvisation together. Then, a man who was lying on the floor stretching rolled slowly towards us. Our improv duo was receptive to his contact. However, his body language quickly revealed sexual attraction to my body. This man was intrusive with his hands and his legs. He wrapped himself around me so that I felt limited in my movements. He forced himself between me and my partner, and clung to me, which had the effect of ejecting my morning partner outside the trio. At another moment, this intrusive man writhed and directed his hands to my breasts and my stomach to intentionally grope me. I adjusted my movements to avoid finding myself in his arms with my abdomen accessible to him. My morning partner morning sensed that something non-consensual was happening. We remained in constant visual contact and communicated to each other our question marks. Despite our efforts to continue our light, playful, creative synergy, the response of this man didn't change. He continued trying to take hold of my body and his sexual touch pursued me at every moment. When I was writing this story, I talked to the gentleman from the morning dance. He said the situation was so clear that he was profoundly offended and upset by this man, who he saw as a depraved amateur.

During that dance, I maintained an energetic and willful hope that my accomplice and I could transmit the spirit and the benefits of contact improv to this man. This despite the improvisation feeling like a quandary, with me trying to save myself from a vicious man by seeking refuge in the ocean of kindness of a real gentleman. My worst thought was to imagine this man having this attitude in his life in general, and all the other women who would be traumatized by it.

So I tried to do something different to end the improv and offer him a last chance to transform his experience. When I let go of the hand of my gentleman accomplice, he was easily detached from the trio. He respected my decision to confront on my own the problem clinging to my skin. Now, alone with this man obsessed with sexual energy, to avoid his attacks I put myself upright standing directly in front of him. When he wanted to grab me, I put my hands on his head and could thereby remain at arm's length from him. His head burned. With kindness, I proposed gently to move in spirals. His head started moving here and there, falling into my hands, which moved in echo. His body followed behind his head, like he was drunk. I said to myself, "he seems sick. Perhaps his desires come from his head? In this state, how can he regain his senses?" It was at that precise moment that I understood that there was nothing I could do to help him. I did not know how to stop him from catapulting sexual energy towards me. He wasn't there to learn contact improv with an open heart, to respect and listen to others, but to feed other intentions. I realized, in concentrating on his imbalance, I had accepted to remain in his crosshairs, and I had abused myself by continuing to allow his "bombs" of sexual energy to blow up in my face. I abruptly ended the dance, staring him directly in the eyes. He asked me if I danced often or elsewhere, if he could invite me out. My answer was, "No, thank you. I do not dance anywhere but here." I had no other words in the face of the vulgarity of his sexual obsession. I felt speechless by the situation, frozen by the guilt of having abused myself for so long while thinking I was saving myself.

Afterward, I observed him on the dancefloor. He approached and latched onto other women in the same manner. I also had the fortune of seeing an experienced female dancer with him, who handled him with considerable skill. She was alert,

theatrical, and imposing. She responded swiftly to propositions that displeased her. She was particularly expressive with the way she bounded back, left, right, even running forward. I saw him chase after her, but rather than seeming like "cat and mouse," they were like two cats because she had taken control of the dance. She did not allow him to force intimacy upon her. It seemed like she had many tools at her disposal to handle whatever she did not approve of. I realized that although I wanted to listen and respect others, above all I had a responsibility to respect myself and to not accept unwanted energy on my body. I remain profoundly upset by this experience, which revealed just how vulnerable I truly was. I wonder, what personal tools can I develop to avoid being touched or sexually abused in contact improv? What kind of workshops could help me? Should a collective process be put in place to report repeated transgressions of sexual boundaries in the community? Should our community put more importance on education about how to respectfully manage sexual energy? If not, could safer contact improv spaces for beginners and people in physical/social rehabilitation be created?

- 2 -

As a woman who has experienced unwanted sexual touching and other intense, unwanted sexual energy in contact improv, I would like to pose these specific questions to men:

- What do you think about conventional gender roles in contact improv?
- What is your intention in practicing contact improv?
- How do you welcome and direct your sexual energy with respect to your intentions? Can you describe the different processes that take place within you (choice of partner, movements, touch, positions)?

- Have you had any difficult experiences?
- Do you feel an attraction for the sensual or sexual in contact improv? At what moments does it come up, and in what way?
- Has your sexual energy ever felt to be out of control in the way it manifests?
- Have you often felt sexual attraction to dance with a particular person? In your experience, why does this happen? In contact with the person, do you feel your sexual energy become more activated? How do you manage this energy? What impact does the sexual energy have in that moment?

Anonymous "G"

When I was asked if I wanted to participate on this writing project on "unsafe" experiences, I replied that I never had that kind of problem.

For me, the border is very clear: Dance is an art and, like every art, the dance has a strong spiritual dimension. I also like the sensuality in it. This is not a problem, in general... It's part of the body, it's part of the dance, all dances ... If some people seem to have difficulty to understand the difference between sensuality and sexuality, I surely have enough confidence in myself and my strength to not be afraid and know how to manage it without feeling assaulted.

Then, I remembered this episode that I had surely wanted to forget ...

We danced together, as always. And as always, the dance had been fun and enjoyable. But at the end, he told me that

it had been a long time since he had felt such a connection like that with "a woman." I did not understand what he was talking about. It was exactly the same as usual. And then he made a proposition to continue the connection "in this way." What did he mean: "in this way?!" He insisted on asking me my own feelings about what he was saying, as to convince me to acknowledge that it also came from me. It was disturbing, out of nowhere. The dance had turned into a pretext for something else. It was not about the CI, it was not about the dance, about our duet, or even about me. It was just him, getting lost in his own needs and imposing them to me. It's appeared in this almost sacred space that can be so often created by the contact between two dancers engaged in this practice. I felt like he was insulting the dance. I felt pity for him, and a lot of disgust. I thought it was nothing. I laughed. But I talked to my boyfriend about it... and I expressed my anger by making a video, just for me.

So I guess that kind of problem is finally mine too ...

But it's hard to admit it. As if recognizing that it could exist was going to sully CI and the community.

But it has nothing to do with dancing. It's just the story of a human who wants to impose himself on another human without taking into account who he is or why he is present.

I think it's important to respect this practice which is above all playing with each other, and a dialogue, a technical research, a curiosity towards the body, all based on the foundation of listening to the other.

Anonymous "H"

I was going to contact improv on quite a regular basis. There was this guy, let's call him Ralph. Ralph was at least 10-15 years older than me and seemed to always try dancing with me first, before heading towards anyone else. Our bodies moved well together, but I started getting weirded out when we exchanged emails after he told me he does yoga retreats - which I love. He started sending me photos of places he visited and inviting me to join him. I had barely spoken a word to him. At first, I dismissed as being friendly and answered I couldn't. I think we danced again another time. I was really hoping there was no bad intention behind it because if it was, it would be awfully creepy considering our age difference and how young I was at the time. The emails continued and just ignored them. I never agreed to dance with him again.

Anonymous "I"

Contact improvisation is the most beautiful interactional and spiritual thing I could experience through artistic and proprioceptive expression.

I think that the line between maternal touch and sensual touch is very clear for me.

Contact improv is, above all, alchemy. It requires mutual confidence, and meditation in motion. Touch plays an integral role in the experience. Teachers and experienced dancers have the responsibility to educate new dancers how to discover proprioceptive touch. Without this collective edu-

cation, contact improv loses value and meaning.

Although I would say I have not been harmed, I have had some uncomfortable moments where I have had to check my doubts by asking questions to dance partners.

It may have helped me to have a background in psychology, helping me in the process, allowing me to draw clear boundaries and speak my needs to the dancers in question. I recommend to others to not stop dancing, but to surround yourself with experienced dancers who know the rules and the philosophy and to use your instincts to avoid those who make you feel uneasy. I think this problem should be addressed to contact improv teachers, and for workshops to be offered on maternal touch. I suggest staying honest without yourself, and to not project your frustrations during the dance. There are extraordinary dancers who really dance for the love of it. It's important to remain objective, and not to generalize, lest you end up hurting others in return. My choice has been to explore other groups of dancers, and to trust my intuition. I have also chosen to refuse dances without needing to justify myself or give any reason. I have chosen to keep dancing contact improv as originally taught by its creators.

THE GAZE

By Zara Hannaford

I was taught that it is rude to stare. It seemed obvious to me that there is no reason you should impose your focus on someone who hasn't asked for it, who didn't agree to be the recipient of your intent. I have always felt the power in a look, the openness it invites and sometimes demands, depending on the length and strength of a gaze.

Staring is anything but reciprocal. It's the most basic interactional one way street, along with shouting at someone who doesn't speak your language, and the King Hit of modern folklore. Staring necessarily involves an actor and a recipient of the action. One who has choice, and one who does not. I still remember the surprise I felt when I was still most definitely a girl, to be often and thoroughly looked over, up and down, taken in, watched, followed, and gazed upon. There is an extreme yet subtle sense of powerlessness to feel invaded by someone's gaze. There is no physically unwanted advance, there are no words exchanged to which this unpleasant feeling can be anchored. There is simply a feeling of walls being tested, walls that have been carefully constructed to protect against exactly this, of defenses being breached, of a personal zone of safety somehow becoming more porous, more penetrable to the advancing attention of another.

It's been documented that we can feel the effects of another's gaze without knowing it is there. The phenomenon of the male gaze is defined, discussed and debated in literature, art, anthropology and feminist philosophy. It is a viewpoint, a way of looking at the world through the eyes of power and privilege, and goes with feeling entitled to that power and

therefore to the viewpoint.

How can I “dance like nobody’s watching” when there’s definitely someone watching?

When I dance, the feeling is so special. There is nothing else like it that I’ve been able to find. I can truly find a place of single minded focus, of extreme awareness of life and sensation and of being-ness. It is a feeling that transmutes into a reciprocal feeling of flow and mutual connection to the moment when I dance with another. These feelings, I know now, are permeable to thievery in the form of the man who stands, as if on the sidelines of a match, as if greedily watching a performance that isn’t for him. This moment, which would have previously been reserved for my own self to relish the stoppage of time, the ease of clean breath, or to practice speaking in the one-of-a-kind language that can only be spoken in the space between two bodies meeting, these moments, are dulled for the influx of uncalled-for attention. Suddenly there is a guard up, involuntarily, which mires the previously fluid and easeful communion with the present moment.

This man is not one man, but is the amalgamated creation of every man who has ever stood there, languid in his contentment to watch without listening, to gaze without seeing. His feet are still, wide apart and planted in unapologetic certainty that his belonging is decided, his position is sure and this looking is just fine. If he could see, if I could make him see, he would note with chagrin the selfishness of his incursion, and he would turn his gaze down and away.



Anonymous "J"

Here is my recollection of an uncomfortable jam I had about 6 or 7 years ago.

I hadn't been doing contact improv for very long, but I was starting to get more comfortable in my physical abilities. However, for the social aspect of the dance, I hadn't gotten to the point of mustering up the courage to solicit partners at jams. Aside from jamming with people I already knew I would mostly dance with folks who would approach me. One sunny day at a contact jam in the Studio 303 space, I was approached by a joyous and confident person. We started to dance, and quickly I felt we were not at the same energy level. His was more directed, kinetic than mine in that moment. We fell into a sort of feedback loop where the more he pushed and pulled, the less I gave since I felt less confident in my own movement, and so the more he pulled and pushed. He then decided to stop the dance on several occasions to point out what he took to be missed opportunities on my part, instructing me on the movements I could have done based on his initiations. I believe he was trying to help, perhaps not knowing how to deal with my withdrawal, but it ended up only further putting out the fire.

I have learned much about my agency in a dance since this time, especially about feeling ok to exit a dance that doesn't suit me. But, I also learned that since contact improv jams can often be multi-level partner experiences, the choice to enter a teaching dynamic is one to make cautiously as it can very quickly set up a strong power hierarchy in a space that is meant to be co-created. I do believe there are constructive teaching moments, and I have learned much in jams from other dancers. Being even sometimes in a teaching po-

sition myself, I have had the most positive and constructive experiences when there is consent to go in that direction together.

Trapped

I realized lately that during the jams, the underscores and the ecstatic dances I only dance with other women. The only men I dance with are my boyfriend and my close friends. When I noticed this pattern I felt surprised because I've always seen myself as someone who interacts easily with most people, men, women or gender-queers. Then, I felt in a bit deeper in my sensations and I saw that what's underneath this tendency of mine are feelings of disgust and protection, and I understood right away where it all came from. During these last few months I went to several jams, here and in other cities. I remember, with my head and my body (as I'm writing these lines my stomach is tense), the experience that is at the root of my reaction. This is a very subtle and quiet situation... to the point where I wasn't sure that it deserved a place in this zine. But this kind of atmosphere, filled with unspoken tensions and discomforts, is exactly what we have to bring to light. So here I go...

It was during a weekend jam in another city. There were two men there that I didn't know before but who seemed eager to get to know me. As from the start of the jam I felt that their hugs were a bit too long for my liking, but since we're part of a community where most people exchange really long hugs, I repressed my reaction of wanting to step back, out of politeness and fear to hurt. Ahh...us "good girls!" When we're brought up with these principles it's sometimes hard

to know our boundaries and to gather the strength to honor them. Often during the jam I felt that these two men would come towards me to partner up for a workshop, to dance or to give me more hugs. I avoided them politely and my brain didn't consciously register the irritation I felt towards them. However, I remember very clearly the moment that I really didn't like. It happened during the evening jam. Most people were dancing in duos or in groups, but I wanted to dance on my own, to run, hop and swirl. I felt joyful and I wanted to express it that way. During the jam I quickly noticed that these two men were trying to dance with me. They spotted me from a distance and came towards me, totally entering my bubble to create a contact between our bodies. At first I dodged their attempts and I thought it was normal that they were trying to find a partner to dance. But after a while it became weirder and weirder. They didn't seem to understand that I wanted to dance on my own. I kept on dancing and moving in the space, weaving through the other dancers, and then I would come nose-to-nose with one of the two, who would force a contact between us without even looking me in the eyes (to see if I wanted to dance with him or not). I dodged again but I started to feel more and more irritated. The situation had become an uncomfortable pursuit where I would avoid them and they kept coming after me, with all the other dancers not seeing what was going on. Obviously my initial joy had made way for a mix of irritation, fear and a desire to run away.

Now, I regret not stopping, turning around, looking them straight in the eyes and saying "I don't want to dance with you, please stop following me." And I would've been polite even!... But I didn't do that. I felt so invaded in my space and disgusted by these two men with their sleazy smiles, who wanted to hug me and dance with me. I just stopped dancing and I left the room. Why didn't I say something? Because

se I felt that their inappropriate behaviors weren't obvious enough to "accuse" them of anything, and once again, I was blocked by my fear of being hurtful.

I saw them as two men who were a bit pathetic and who had a great need for human contact and not enough social skills to pick up on body language and facial expressions. But then I quickly noticed that they didn't behave this way at all with male dancers and other women, older or more experienced in this community. So instead of thinking "poor them, they just want to connect with another human," I started to understand that they had a sexual impulse that lead them to want to connect physically with young women who are a bit naïve and not empowered enough to say no.

The men I'm telling you about are probably not aware of their behaviors and of the impact that they have. That's why I hope that they will read this, that theirs minds will expand and that they will decide to behave with more tact and decency. I think it's sad that from this ambiguous experience, completely silent and subtle and yet somatically memorable, I developed a disgust and an apprehension to dance with other men that I don't know. I hope that the CI men, whether they feel concerned or not by this story, will become conscious of the unspoken relationships that are woven during the dances and that can truly harm the experience of many women. I also hope that the women who have been dancing for a long time and who have become the pillars of the community will open a watchful eye and take on a role of benevolent guide for the newcomers, even if it's simply by talking openly of these dynamics that too often go unnoticed.

Anonymous "K"

I started contact dancing when I was 14. As a young teen, alienated and alone, I was desperately seeking a way to divorce the incessant loops of suburban monotony. A contact elder found me and brought me to my first Sunday morning jam. I remember leaving and feeling like I was floating, like it was the first time I'd ever met my body. I found a cafe near by and manically journaled my experience. It felt like for the first time all my pores were oozing life. Contact dance became my teenage vacation getaway where I got to be weightless, bodiless and real. I danced everywhere I went. I introduced contact to my family, my friends, my friends friends, my jewish youth group and anyone who would listen. Wherever I went I looked for the dance. I moved to new york when I was 17 and found the contact jam as a way to anchor myself in an unfamiliar place. I later moved to Jerusalem and found a group to dance with in yet another foreign world. I needed contact as a life support. The Jerusalem community was small but really devout. We did a contact street intervention in the busiest intersection in Jerusalem that made my heart truly glow. I met my first boyfriend in that community who ended up being the first person I ever had sex with. The relationship ended but I continued to dance. But the carnal knowledge I had gained changed everything for me. I was aware of my sexualized body and this differentiation became more and more palpable.

I had heard about a big contact jam in Tel Aviv and felt the pull to go. I traveled from Jerusalem and I remember coming up to the studio so fully alive and ready. It was a big jam of 50+ people and I could tell it was die-hard group of dancers. I changed into my dance clothes and started stretching. I slithered around for a while and maybe even danced with

a partner or a group, thrilled to be in the company of other dancers. I was alone again moving around in my body to the silence (which was always something that just really blew me away...) and an older man approached me to dance. I accepted and as we began to feel our rhythm I felt more and more used. He was breathing hard and moaning a little bit. I didn't know how to get out of it and no one had ever told me that it was okay to end a dance when I felt uncomfortable. As we continued to dance, the repulsion in me started boiling. He flung me around and I got more and more limp. the dance must have lasted for at least 20 minutes and by the end I was so confused; left with residue of his sweat staining my clothes. I had never felt so gross in my life. I went outside to get some fresh air and I saw some other dancers sitting outside, all mostly male. I told them what had happened and how awful I felt. They asked who it was and they said, „oh right him, yea he's a bit of a problem in the community" and that was kind of it. Nothing more said or done. I went back into the studio repulsed and dejected but I tried to dance anyway but barely could. I never went back to that jam.

As I continued dancing, I began taking note that most of the people who wanted to dance with me were older men and always had been older men. I didn't realize this because I was in love with the innocence of the movement, the thrill of true play and the unknown of the cadence the dance would take. Contact dance had been my home, my community and in many ways raised me more than my parents ever did but I had to stop because the dance had become infused with something so disgusting to me that I could just never dance again with the same love that i had when I was 14.



840 Cherrier, Montréal

Moving From “Yucky” to Creating a Safe Space

Throughout the years, I have had an on-and-off relationship to CI, perhaps more off than on, preferring formal workshops and classes to jams. In workshops, I find, there tends to be a clearer frame for the dancing and the emphasis is on the dance and not on the relationships. In the jams, I have often felt uncomfortable, have had unpleasant experiences in which I felt boundaries were not clear, energies ambiguous and intentions mixed. Of course, it is difficult to pinpoint what it was exactly... was it when I accepted to dance with somebody whom I wouldn't have chosen? Or, when, a bit later, I felt repulsed by the sweaty shirt and body odor but didn't end the dance? Or, when I sensed that his goodbye hug was too long and whole-bodied for my level of comfort and I tried to extricate myself from it feeling awkward and embarrassed? What I hated most about these situations is that there was no one specific act that I could point to or talk about, it was more of an overall “yucky feeling,” something that didn't feel right or good to me.

There is, however, one experience that I remember very clearly, it has left lasting traces in my body-mind. It was during a workshop in Montreal given by a well-known teacher from the U.S. whom I had never studied with before. I was really enjoying her class and, hence, felt even more shocked when I had a super “yucky” experience right there, in the middle of the class. We were exploring “the cushion,” feeling the cushion of air around a person's body. My partner, whom I had not chosen, was an older man that I didn't know and didn't feel particularly comfortable with. I felt stuck with but did not know how to get out of the situation without

seeming impolite, lying and/or missing out on doing the exercise. Hence, we continued and I tried my best to stay grounded, friendly but with boundaries. However, when it was his turn to “feel my cushion,” I left the room midway and hid, to cry and vent my anger and disgust. I do not know what his intention was, there was surely no malicious intent on his part, but the way he looked at me while he did it, THE WAY he did it, his whole energy, felt disgusting and violating to me. The fact that I couldn’t move, I was supposed to be still while he “felt my cushion,” made me feel passive and in the role of a victim, having to submit to something that my whole being revolted against. I remember looking desperately at the teacher, trying to send her emergency S.O.S. messages (face in distress, body tense, can you tell what’s going on here??!!) and feeling betrayed, then outraged, when she didn’t intervene. I think she might have come by and checked in on us but then left (perhaps she didn’t notice anything, perhaps she didn’t know how to respond, perhaps she thought it was up to me to handle). Whatever the case, I remember feeling totally traumatized and alienated from the rest of the people in the workshop who carried on, unknowing that something so disagreeable had happened right in their midst. I don’t remember the rest of the workshop, I think I went back and watched a bit before leaving, but I’m not sure.

I don’t think I attended another CI event for years nor do I go very often still today.

In the meantime, I found an article on the web by Martin Keogh “101 Ways to Say NO to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust” that I really appreciated because it was the first time that I saw the issue addressed openly by a leader in the community. I also noticed at one point that the Montreal CI community had some sessions on this topic and

was glad, but did not have the heart or the strength to go to these sessions myself. I felt perplexed by the fact that in my many years of CI workshops, classes and jams in various places, I never heard anybody clearly address this issue publicly and give it the attention it deserves. Indeed, one of my suggestions to create change in this area is that teachers, facilitators and others make a formal reminder at the beginning of each and every class, jam and event to raise awareness and suggest possibilities so that everyone feels safe, comfortable and free. I would appreciate public reminders to not take things personally, that it is totally ok (and wonderful) for people to decline offers, end dances, shift dynamics at any point without needing to explain or justify; reminders for people to be aware of what energy they are putting out and be honest with themselves about what some of their underlying motives might be in approaching somebody and reconsider. In short, awareness breeds upon awareness and the more attention and care this topic receives publicly, and repeatedly, the more it will become integrated and normal to talk about it, act upon it and change behaviors.

I am delighted that this Zine is coming out and that others are speaking up about this topic. I hope that the CI community will make this a priority in the coming years and actively take action, incorporating these fundamentals into workshops, classes and jams, not only at the beginning of an event but also throughout, offering reminders throughout jams and classes to say no, change, find an ally, and more (101 ways at least!). In this way, CI will become more safe and inviting, especially for young women and people of all ages and genders who are perhaps conditioned to be less assertive and to "be nice" and "not hurt anybody's feelings" (though they end up hurting their own in the process!). This is a wonderful learning opportunity for all of us, better identifying what our own needs and boundaries are, how to

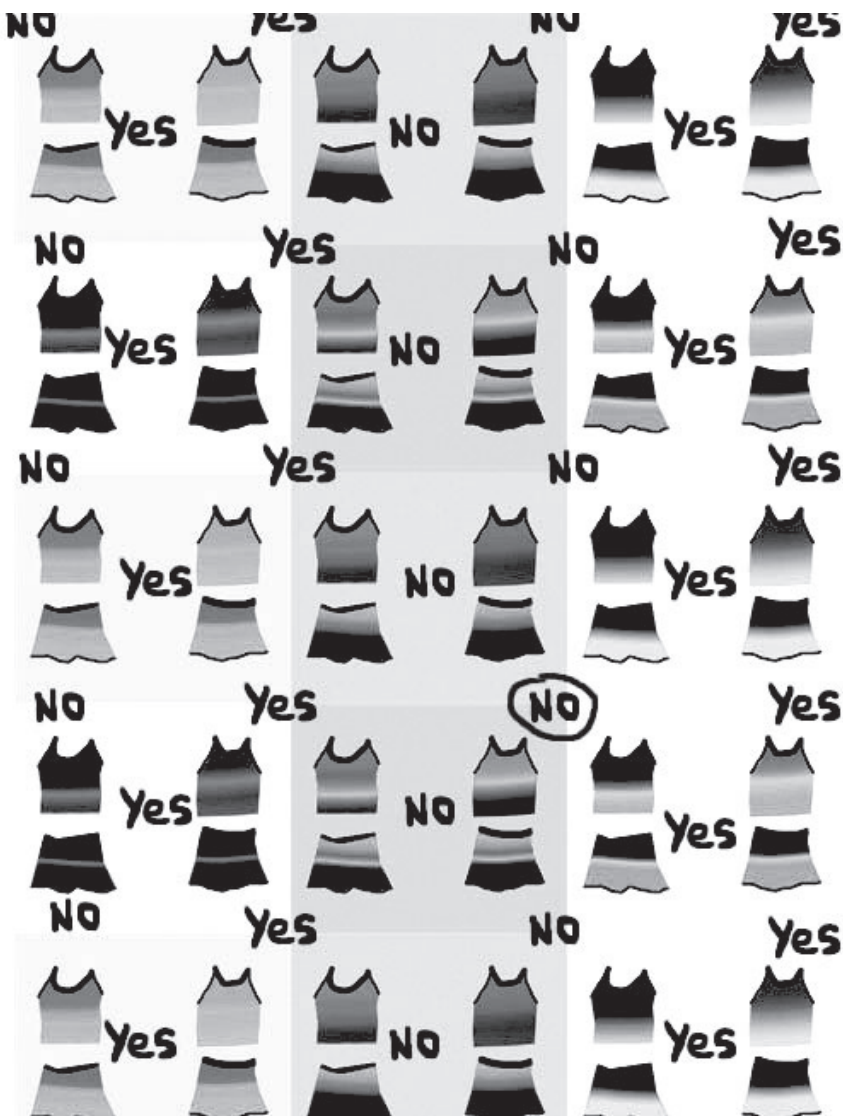
communicate them, and how to respect those of others.

I encourage the Montreal CI community (and CI teachers, facilitators and communities everywhere!) to come up with their own version of what the Boston CI named: "Suggested Guidelines for Safety and Awareness at the Jam." The importance of language is crucial and most of the Boston document meets my needs for clarity, respect and awareness. However, I would nuance their statement: "If you aren't aware of what your boundaries are or have trouble saying "no" in your dances, you have the responsibility to learn how to do this" as I find it unwelcoming. Perhaps this could be better stated as: "If..., we invite you to begin asserting your boundaries and needs, say no, and know that we support your each and every step towards empowerment." Also problematic for me is: "If something happens in your dance that is troubling to you or feels like a violation, please speak directly to your partner, refraining from blaming or accusing." This seems to indicate a lack of awareness of how difficult it can be for somebody who has experienced an unpleasant or traumatic event to directly address the person involved. Instead, it might be stated as: "If..., and you feel able to speak with the person directly, please do so. If not, please talk with one of the coordinators and explain to them what happened, how you feel and what you might need to best support you." Ideally, there would be at least one coordinator/person who is especially trained in/sensitive to these matters and could offer listening and support as well as help to take whatever steps might be deemed necessary. We all need allies.

Let us make the CI community a safe and welcoming space, one full of allies and resources, an inspiration for clarity and awareness, in which the murky shadows are openly addressed without fear. What we stand to gain is a thousand-fold

richer than what we are presently losing...the trust, confidence, vibrancy, creativity and participation of countless potential members.

For example, me.



Final Thoughts from the Editor

Suggestions for creating a safer environment:

- Do not assume that you can impose sexual energy on someone and that it is their responsibility to put up boundaries to stop you. If the person is at a point where they have to put up boundaries, you may have already gone too far.
- If you feel sexual energy in your body, simply notice it without feeding it or letting it affect the way you touch your dance partner. If you wish to pursue sexual energy ask verbal consent and consider only an enthusiastic yes to be a yes. (However, even consensual sexual energy may cause discomfort in other jam participants). Otherwise, politely end the dance if you become aroused.
- Allow for the dance to be collaborative. Don't assume that someone wants to be instructed or to have their body manipulated or constantly lifted.
- As a community, designate resource people who can be available for active listening and conflict resolution. Make their presence and identity clearly visible (e.g., pictures of their faces on a board, coloured tape or arm bands).
- If a particular person is repeatedly identified as causing discomfort in other dancers, have community leaders talk to the person directly.
- If you believe you may have crossed someone else's boundaries, talk to a resource person and ask them to contact the person with an offer to acknowledge your mistake, apologize, and take whatever other steps may be requested of

you to make amends.

- If you witness a dance where you question whether boundaries are being crossed, and you feel capable of being a support person, make the duo into a trio and check out the vibes. Create a subtle opportunity for the person to gracefully leave the dance, if they want to, and then be available to listen afterward if they need someone to talk to.
- Experienced female dancers: make a point of dancing with inexperienced female dancers, and opening up conversations about this issue.
- Teachers: acknowledge the problem and emphasize the importance of consent in your classes. Hold workshops specifically aimed at addressing this issue.
- Make resources readily available at all jams and events (e.g., this zine, Koegh's 101 Ways to Say No). Create new resources in consultation with the people most affected by the issue.
- Have community conversations where this issue can be discussed once or twice a year.

Suggestions for what to do if you feel uncomfortable in a dance:

- End the dance. You may do this at any time for any reason. You do not have to explain or justify yourself.
- If you're okay to stay in the dance, try changing the energy. Speed up, get up, create physical distance.
- Dance your feelings. Exaggerate your movements.

- If it feels right for you, talk to your dance partner. Try phrases like, “when you [do this behaviour], I feel...” or “I feel uncomfortable when...” (However, even if you are not able to identify specific moments or behaviours, your discomfort is still valid.)
- Talk to teachers, jam organizers, resource people, or experienced dancers.

As a final note, I would like to acknowledge that women are not the only group of people who may experience a unique kind of discomfort in the contact improv community. For example, a wheelchair user shared with me that the CI organization in his city was actively making it difficult for him to participate in the weekly jams, because they did not want a wheelchair user in the dance space. As another example, one of the contributors to this zine pointed out that she sees a disproportionate representation of white people in the community. Why might that be? When addressing issues of injustice, it is important to consider the intersections of a variety of identities, including gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, age, class, etc.

If you would like to submit a story to be published in an upcoming online collection, or you have any other feedback, please write to **safer.contactimprov@gmail.com** .

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