

Contact Improvisers Consider #metoo

[Dancers' Group](#)

[The West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam](#) in Berkeley (wcciJAM) has been a hub for the investigation of the form for over 25 years. Contact Improvisation (CI), which grew out of choreographic experiments in the early 1970s, is a relational dance form in which dancers improvise around touch, weight exchange, and the physics of equilibrium and falling. CI challenged assumptions about dance, but has since developed into a form practiced widely by both professional and recreational dancers around the world. “Contact Improvisation’s influence can be seen throughout modern and postmodern dance choreography, performance, and dance training worldwide, especially in relationship to partnering and use of weight” ([Contact Quarterly](#))

Contact Improvisation’s open-ended physical dialogues between dancers offers a platform for critical inquiry of movement possibilities. Can it also cultivate a questioning of the cultures we inhabit? In wcciJAM 2017’s Statement on Inclusivity and Assumptions, teachers and organizers created a statement acknowledging that while our dance is not enough to change the larger sociopolitical context, we must grapple with the issues that are present in the room at every jam. Each of us arrives at the dance with our own personal histories, at an intersection of specific identities. Can awareness of how culture and socioeconomic structures inhabit our bodies, minds, and habits, help us avoid perpetuating inequities? How do we continue to question both our dancing and the subculture that we’ve built to support its practice? What are the form’s potentials for disrupting oppression and privileges based on identity?

The practice of CI is uniquely positioned to offer a space for the investigation of how we express our personal boundaries through touch and movement. A statement most often attributed to dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton says that CI should deal with “physics, not ‘chemistry.’” Nevertheless, this boundary is not always respected, nor is it easy to define. The dancing body and the social body coexist. Learning CI can involve learning to navigate complex experiences and interactions where a strong sense of personal agency is called for. This can be particularly challenging for younger women, gender non-conforming folks, dancers with disabilities, or other structurally disadvantaged groups. In this moment of #metoo, we – Cathy, Rosemary, and Miriam along with the rest of the team organizing the wcciJAM – are committed to empowering dancers to maintain healthy boundaries, to cultivate self-care and agency in their dance relationships. With that in mind, “De/constructing Power” was chosen as this year’s festival theme.

What follows are responses to the question, “How do you see the #metoo movement impacting the CI community, or not?” from some of this year’s female-identified teachers:

Jo Kreiter:

“I stepped away from the contact community in 2004 when my son was born and came back to it in 2016, when he was old enough to stay home alone for a little while, so I could go to the jam. When I came back, I was so delighted to see a younger generation had taken up the form, and to see tremendous thoughtfulness around inclusivity and power. There are many more brown bodies on the dance floor than when I left. And gender non-conforming bodies. There is spoken, articulate language, and even written declarations, for how to be in a jam with respect for all. I think dancers are some of the best creatures on earth, so I am not surprised by these evolutions of thought and practice. Sadly though, I still hear from young women about the ‘creepy

guy' factor at jams. Women, especially younger women, are still feeling a need to dodge certain men at certain moments. So we do have some work to do, still, as a community. What gives me hope is that the jam is a place where I learned to practice strong boundaries and to keep myself safe. It is a fertile learning ground for finding one's best self."

Taja Will:

"I personally have not seen it impact my primary CI community but I've been hearing from other communities that the #metoo movement has liberated incidents and feelings around safety and respect in their communities, some folks have been called out for recurring behavior that makes others feel unsafe."

Anya Cloud:

"It impacts everything. As dance artists I believe that we are the material of the work. And that includes our complex histories that often relate to trauma. I think it is exposing the need for more explicit and nuanced consent practices with CI. I think that the #metoo movement is facilitating some space for more transparent questioning/discourse of patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity that can be quite pervasive in the CI community. It is ongoing and incremental work to move against these dominant systems. The current statistics are that someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted every 98 seconds. We can't ignore this within the CI community. And I do notice people talking more about power, consent, agency, predatory behavior, gender, and assumptions now than I have in the past. We can do better. It is vital and important work in terms of visioning and manifesting the kind of CI culture and practice that we want in the future. It is all quite intense and necessary."

Cathie Caraker:

“I can’t speak for the whole CI community but I can say that my own approach has changed. I’m much quicker to speak up now when my ‘ick radar’ goes off. I recently approached an organizer who had invited me to a workshop with a male teacher who’s long had a reputation for being one of “those guys” who hits on female participants. I told the organizer that I wasn’t comfortable being at an event with this teacher, and told him why. His response was quite defensive. However, he passed on what I’d said and that teacher reached out to me. We ended up having a very good conversation, in which he shared with me that he’s been working on changing his behavior. It was one of those moments where I felt a clear shift because I’d spoken up. It feels awkward and even scary to stick your neck out. As women we’re socialized to be nice. We want people to like us. We’re afraid of offending, or god forbid, making a mistake. We can teach young women about healthy boundaries and consent and blah blah, but we’re still not addressing the core problem, which is patriarchy, male entitlement. The imbalance of power is very old but we can change it. We can support female-identified artists and boycott dance institutions that don’t. We can ask our male peers to take a step back, to listen more and ask how they can help. We can facilitate discussions on diversity and power sharing at our dance festivals. It’s happening – there is a sea change afoot.”

Diana Lara:

“Even though I found the facts and roots of the #metoo movement very valid, I think that the press and social networks have found, again – as in previous social movements – another way to sensationalize it and commercialize it. I hope that in general the movement provides more awareness in the population and the CI community about the social norms that perpetuate sexual harassment and violence. Only by being aware of these social norms, can we have more accountability. I am a fan of Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, and I agree that we have the duty of understanding the systems

and mechanisms that perpetuate the status quo in order to change it.”

Ronja Ver:

The #metoo movement has emboldened me, as a teacher, to bring up the issue of boundaries in every class, and to have a chat with every new student. I feel strongly about this, because what I constantly hear from young dance students is that they love CI, but would never go to a jam because the one time they went they were touched inappropriately by an older, more experienced male dancer.

I've been hearing a lot more requests for education and guidelines around touch and consent in the CI communities. It seems like this time around some of the cis male facilitators are also getting on board, which is a huge step forward. I've sat in circles where women who were violated by unwanted inappropriate touch in a CI setting have spoken out, and where the perpetrators have actually been barred from coming back. This is a change from the age-old system of denial and victim blaming, but it will take time for people to also start trusting facilitators to take action against violations and assault. It is still necessary for a network of sisters to warn each other about teachers and dancers with whom they've experienced hurtful or uncomfortable situations.”

Jen Chien

Before answering this question, I first need to state that I don't necessarily feel like I am part of the “CI community.” I have practiced CI for a long time, and it's meant a whole lot to me as a human and as an artist, but I don't necessarily feel like part of a community based around CI. It's not fun to be the only POC in a room, and that's unfortunately been all too prevalent in the communities that arise around CI. I'm not mad at it, it's just felt like it's not for me.

What I would hope for, in terms of the #metoo movement's impact for the practice and teaching of CI, is for us all to be more and more aware of how gendered and sexual power imbalances operate at all levels of our lives and experiences, even when we have the best of intentions, even when we are purposefully trying to create spaces that stand apart from society's ills. CI is a practice that intentionally crosses normative socialized physical boundaries, in a mostly unstructured way. This can bring a lot of stuff up for people, good and/or bad. And if/when there are sexual or sexualized energies present in a dance, we need to be able to talk about it, and to negotiate and respect boundaries and consent, just as in any other physical interaction. Personally, my practice of CI is completely non-sexual, and that's part of what I love about it. I know that other practitioners may have other thoughts, feelings or opinions. Knowing that there's a range, it's important for us to not bury this stuff under the rug just because it may be uncomfortable to talk about.

I myself had a #metoo moment, early on in my practice of CI, at the Tuesday night jam at good ol' 848 Divisadero. I and another young female friend were dancing in a trio with an older man who we both felt was behaving in a sexually violating way. We confronted him directly in the moment, he apologized and also denied what we were accusing him of, and then my friend and I processed it together later. I feel lucky that I and my friend experienced the same thing at the same time, and we could empower each other to speak up and state our boundaries. If it had just been me, I'm not sure I would have had the courage to do so, or even to trust in my own experience of what was happening. This person was a regular attendee of the jam, and we had mutual friends/acquaintances. It did not end up turning me away from the practice, but I will say that at the time I didn't feel comfortable sharing the experience with more than one or two close friends. I hope that the spirit of clarity, honesty, and accountability the #metoo movement has brought forth can inspire more discussion and empowerment for everyone and anyone who

practices.”

About Dancers' Group