

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

A Thrilling Momentum  
(to Touch, to Feel, to Move, is to Know)

by

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I live in my body. I feel my legs carry me down streets, my arms pick up bags and boxes and buckets and books. My head turns to look up at the sky, my feet make contact with the ground, my hands hold other hands. I know a world of physical sensation, tactile contact, tangible interactions. Yet I find that bodies are not given the kind of attention they deserve. We use our bodies as tools, as objects and vehicles, as a means to an end. In reality they are the filters through which everything we encounter passes, before we interpret, analyze, organize it.

When the world we live in disregards the body, the eyes are given priority. We consume so much visual information that the way we value what we see is skewed. Even the body is spoken about in relation to how we see it rather than how we feel it. We are not often asked to reflect on our physical reactions to experiences so we view things from afar, we experience the world at a distance. In his essay on architecture, *The Eyes of the Skin*, Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that, “The gradually growing hegemony of the eye seems to be parallel with the development of western ego-consciousness and the gradually increasing separation of the self and the world, vision separates us from the world whereas the other senses unite us with it.”<sup>i</sup>

In my thesis exhibition, which consists of three works, I attempt to awaken a physical awareness and open spaces for tangible connections to be made. Movement exploration, through formal and informal dance, defines my life and work. I am very much aware of my body in a space, in relationship to the people and things that surround me. Being introduced to Contact Improvisation in a formal setting has given me a structure to support the work I have been making in the past four years.

Contact Improvisation was developed in the early seventies as an outlet for movers to work collaboratively and spontaneously. The ideas and processes that fall under the title of

Contact Improvisation had existed before then, but the language was not formally created until Steve Paxton began developing it with his students and peers. Since then, Contact Improvisation has ridden a cultural wave, moving in and out of popularity depending on the cultural mood.

Originally, Contact Improvisation thrived on the desire of its participants for a space where they could actively disregard traditional gender and hierarchical roles (which commonly found their way into dance studios) and focus instead on movement, weight sharing, and touch.<sup>ii</sup> There was a strong emphasis on the social format called ‘contact jams’ where there was no leader or facilitator, just a general score and some very basic guidelines to ensure everyone’s safety and comfort.

The language of Contact Improvisation is both new and old to me. The physical language is familiar, deeply ingrained in my skin and flesh while the organization and vocabulary is fresh. Each new piece of information I read sparks something inside me. Contact Improvisation today is filling a cultural need for collaboration. This is where I see the structures and outputs of Contact Improvisation being most useful; in the spaces where we come together to create something new.

There is a belief that the body is simply a container for the mind and that the mind is much more important. This leads to a general disregard of the body, to a view of the body and its actions as nothing more than expressions of the mind, but the body and mind are in collaboration, working closely sometimes and distantly others. They sway back and forth, coming together and pulling apart, creating inner tensions that allow you to experience the world differently every day.

Holding, feeling, moving with a person or thing creates a moment in space and time that is yours to share. There is a thrilling momentum present in Contact Improvisation that becomes addictive. You and another person are actively creating a continuous moment that is constantly changing, growing and dwindling, pushing and pulling.

This energy exists in all collaborations, although the physicality of the interaction may be less obvious in other situations. Working with people outside of yourself presents an opportunity to create something that is partially yours and partially theirs. A certain kind of nameless magic appears when the creative energies of multiple people converge in the same space.

So I ask myself, and I ask you: How do we live and create and make in a world that threatens us with our own image and makes us afraid of touch? How do we build meaningful relationships in spaces where intimacy is discouraged? How do we learn through the activation and integration of our bodies?

In working towards answering these questions, I have found that creating my own space where touch and vision, creativity and expression are invited and welcomed is much more rewarding than trying to change a space to suit my needs. I am demanding and idealistic in what I want from a space.

I want spaces that are open and willing to change. I want skills and feelings to circulate actively and continuously. I want lessons that unfold as you learn them and teachers that listen to their students. In his book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* Stephen Nachmanovitch writes about the mystery and magic of improvising with others, “Information flows and multiplies easily. Learning becomes many-sided, a refreshing and vitalizing force.”<sup>iii</sup>

For my thesis, I attempted to create three different spaces where the questions I have asked can be considered and where (I hope) what I want from a space exists for other people involved as well.

The first is *Nothing New*, a collaboration I have been working on with Michelle Kwecien in Hornell, NY. We were fortunate enough to work with students from Hornell High School in a series of workshops where we taught hand-papermaking and zine-making. The raw materials for the project were recycled paper and old newspapers to support the idea of remaking and re-contextualizing the news. Students were able to pull sheets of paper made from the recycled fibers and then return later in the week to create collaged zines with content gleaned from stacks of old newspapers. The stories in the papers were used as prompts for the new stories that students created on their hand-made paper and the results have been tremendous. Some students took the prompts seriously and came up with politically driven material and others made absurd connections and pairings in their zines.

Papermaking is a physical art form; it is messy and wet and it requires the participation of your whole body. It is a meditative process, a returning of remembered movements that guide you as you pull sheet after sheet. In the *Nothing New* workshops the papermaking process usually took the backseat, with the goal being simply to make a surface on which to create the zines. However, there is a corporeal memory that lingers when you handle a handmade sheet of paper, something that you feel in the texture of the sheet, in the deckled edge. After having experienced the physical act of pulling paper, the memory always comes back.

I find that sharing motion with another person, whether it is gardening or lifting something heavy or going for a walk or chopping vegetables, gives you a palpable point of

contact to move forward from. It isn't a verbal or intellectual connection; it's simultaneously simpler and more complex than that. Sharing movements, with and without actual contact, creates a sense of physical solidarity.

Action and movement in learning environments allows room for a connection to be made that isn't based on likes or dislikes, opinions or beliefs, but instead based on the creation of a commonality. By sharing a skill with someone, you are fabricating a connection; I know how to do something, I show you, you do it, and then we both know how to do the same thing. Beginning lessons and relationships by sharing a movement alleviates the pressure of getting to know someone through purely verbal communication. A bond is born through fulfilling an action together and positive physical encounters incite honesty and trust that is harder to earn through conversation alone.

I also create spaces for connection in hand bound notebooks. This part of my work began as a craft-based exploration but is revealing itself to have a social side as well. The books that I sell, trade, and give away leave my hands and become open spaces for their new owner's improvisations and explorations. This is an indirect collaboration – we do not work in the same space and time but we still come together to create.

Creative work thrives on limits. It is only when we know our limits, when we are familiar with the boundaries set around us that we are able to push past those limits and cross those boundaries. A notebook is a physical limit; there are only so many pages of a certain size and shape, weight and texture. The decisions I make while constructing the book eventually affect the decisions you make when using the book. I am guiding you, giving you a place to start and you are free to heed my suggestions or disregard them. In binding the book I expand the limits,

alter the limits so that the person who will come to own the book has something to react to; something to touch and explore, to push and pull, to choreograph a dance of words and drawings with.

There is an unspoken acknowledgement that books are meant to be touched, handled, opened and traveled through. Assembling the books satisfies in me an urge to make, a need to create, to use my hands, to follow patterns, to break them. I am solving puzzles, improvising, making mistakes and correcting them to produce a compelling book that you want to touch.

The final space I have created is an installation where my part in the collaboration is more ambiguous, less apparent and where the physicality is suggested rather than demanded. The sculpture invites the viewer to enter a shrouded space that emanates a glowing light. As the viewer approaches the light it reveals itself as a projection of a live feed of the inside of the space. When the viewer steps into the view of the camera transmitting the feed they see themselves projected on a sheet of paper. The emphasis here is on the presence of the audience.

Pallasmaa writes,

The encounter of any work of art implies a bodily interaction... A work of art functions as another person, with whom one unconsciously converses. When confronting a work of art we project our emotions and feelings onto the work. A curious exchange takes place; we lend the work our emotions, whereas the work lends us its authority and aura. Eventually, we meet ourselves in the work.<sup>iv</sup>

In this piece, the audience literally meets themselves in the work. Without someone there to look at it, to enter the space, the piece is stagnant and empty. As soon as one enters, the work is activated, but the viewer is in control of what happens within the space.

This piece speaks to a collaboration between the art and the viewer. A person who enters the space is given an opportunity- to move or remain still. To explore the potential of your presence in this space, with a view of yourself you don't usually have access to, or to let the space shift around you as you remain stagnant.

In each project I have created a space where the audience is integral to completing the work. I am interested in presence and participation and how we experience and express these through our bodies. Nachmanovitch frames it nicely, "Shared art making is, in and of itself, the expression of, the vehicle for, and the stimulus to human relationships."<sup>v</sup> The key is presenting a space where people feel safe enough to open up, meet you, and share creative work.

I hope to continue working on projects that allow me to share skills and encourage haptic relationships. Ever-changing and amorphous, spaces define our interactions and relationships, but they are malleable. Knowing that you can create a space is as important as knowing that you can change a space; realizing that what is contained in the space is what defines the space – that you affect the space you are in.

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<sup>i</sup> Pallasma, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin* (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005), [http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~arch201/READINGS/Pallasmaa\\_The%20Eyes%20of%20the%20Skin.pdf](http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~arch201/READINGS/Pallasmaa_The%20Eyes%20of%20the%20Skin.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Novack, Cynthia, *Sharing the Dance* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>iii</sup> Nachmanovitch, Stephen, *Free Play* (New York: Tarcher/ Putnam, 1990), 96.

<sup>iv</sup> Pallasma, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin* (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005), [http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~arch201/READINGS/Pallasmaa\\_The%20Eyes%20of%20the%20Skin.pdf](http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~arch201/READINGS/Pallasmaa_The%20Eyes%20of%20the%20Skin.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> Nachmanovitch, Stephen, *Free Play* (New York: Tarcher/ Putnam, 1990), 99.

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