

AN ART OF ASSOCIATION: DEMOCRACY AND DANCE

ANNA KATSMAN



*All that you touch, You Change
All that you Change, Changes you.*
— Octavia Butler

*Could it be that pausing, sensing and playful lightness
are not tools on the way to a new story,
but that they are the new story?*
— Heike Pourian

You enter a room and find others spread out generously around the space, some standing, some laying down, some moving, some still. To enter is also to arrive. To arrive is to ask yourself what you need in order to be there, to be present, to be available to yourself and only therewith to the others with whom you will share the experience to come. This practice is called Contact Improvisation; it can be made available in the everyday life of civil society, is self-organized by the people committed to it, open to anyone interested, and offers direct, personal experience of experimenting with and intimately embodying democratic life. For there is more to democracy than voting for representatives, political campaigns, parliamentary meetings, creating and enforcing laws, judicial hearings, and the rights and responsibilities of national citizenship. These structures are themselves based on a set of norms, values, and commitments that inform a way of associating.

You begin by opening your perception, sensing yourself, sensing others, sensing the interfaces between self and other. You begin to notice the many feelings you hold, consciously and subconsciously, which you repress in daily life, but which nevertheless subtly create the mood that frames your perception: accumulated tension, or maybe excitement;

inspiration or fatigue; tentativeness or curiosity; amusement or unnoticed aggression, whatever it may be. Your first work is to make honest contact with yourself, for you are about to enter into sensitive connection with others where what is at stake is not showing up as a rational, well-functioning, well-disciplined individual who has mastered the relevant social scripts, but rather honestly exploring what it means to show up and connect with others in light of how you actually feel within the parameters of interpersonal respect.

You begin to move on the basis of your impulses and wonder where they come from. Are they your own? Do they stem from others in the room, whether through mimesis or an effort to impress? Where do you seek inspiration? Do you have the courage to try another way? Others move around you on the basis of their impulses. You sense agency in their movements as you sense your own ability to move. You feel the freedom each individual gives the others while simultaneously articulating an atmosphere together, allowing flutters of mutual inspiration; momentarily echoing and being echoed in turn.

At what point does dancing separately together become dancing together, cueing one another's movements, recognizing another's impulse as an occasion for one's own, and being thereby opened to new possibilities for your own movement, freedom enhanced and enabled in and through another? This is a question of sensing — mutual sensing. Is the other open to dancing with you as the possibilities of togetherness evolve out of this moment? Are you?

Arriving with one another, finding the tempo of that arrival, both feel for cues for an invitation to mutuality. A point of contact, touch, emerges between us and we lean in softly, discovering and calibrating who we are in our encounter. How do we find equal weight together to engender a stable structure around which we are able to move? Do you trust me to take your weight — or what would it take for you to begin to trust me? Exploring, we learn that when we both release our weight into one another — and it turns out we have to give more than we anticipated! — we can release ourselves into the structure we also uphold.

Working from points of contact, our aim is neither to lead nor to follow, but to allow our mutual movement to guide us together. You pivot your side around my torso, your leg finds space, and you suspend in float

for a moment. Experimenting, we begin to loosen the hard distinction between creation and discovery, dependence and independence. The impulse we share links our agency and together with you I have new possibilities of expressive movement. In so doing, we overcome our isolation and nourish a shared sense of the world. We tap into human social creativity and establish the conditions that empower us to be active agents, individually and collectively creating our own trajectories. You offer me a shoulder on which to climb and now I balance. The pleasures of free self-expression here are not located in an empty room that I take for myself alone, but in the inspiration for new possibilities of expression you make room for and evoke in me.

The effort of communication through physical contact requires and cultivates a sensibility of mutual listening, trust building, learning how to co-decide and co-create, and being cared for in vulnerable fleshiness. Your head falls onto my shoulders and I softly guide you to the floor, tumbling down with you. My torso enables your vulnerability, your trust, and your joy in having the support to fall, release your uprightness, and find the floor on which to rest and take momentary refuge. We land and pause, sighing with our bodies, leaning on one another, listening for the needs of time and cues to begin again. We reverse course. I now pour into the structure you construct around me. Release is known by having held; holding is known by having released. We are conducting personal research into the forces of gravity to which we are subject both actively and passively, but with an ethical aim — how do we bring ease and lightness into our collective work with the material forces on which we depend, and which shape us? How do we teach and learn from one another in so doing? In a culture of increasing privatization, digitalization, and materialistic consumption as a way of life, we are fostering a commitment to togetherness by building up the sensibilities of solidarity and trust with each other, a solidarity and trust itself based on strengthening our ability to listen to and hear one another, be vulnerable with one another, and be cared for in that vulnerability.

As we move across the room as one, you encounter yet another, a further point of contact, an additional invitation to new dynamics of movement. An entirely new body, a unique way of moving, being, listening, initiating, following. You become the point of mediation between us

three. Each dances their own rhythm with you; polyphonic you become. Your shoulder moves in a different tempo than your hip, accommodating both within your body, which itself takes on a new fluidity in the challenge of mediation. Another joins: a group concresces at various points of contact and becomes one body with many limbs — a mini body politic. Movements of each reverberate across all; your expressions directly influence the larger whole. You are amplified. Your arm, through the extension of many bodies, reaches across to the far side of the room. A moving bundle. Where do we go from here? Our goal is to decide by all listening to what is needed and trying something out. You move, I follow; I move, you follow. No one moves. We all head for different directions. We fall apart, too many separate agendas, and we learn to find one another again or decide that it is better to go our own ways. We discover in the process how often and how dramatically each decides to shift our course, how to take turns guiding, each individually noting when one steers and how one lets oneself be steered, and then examining why.

Our dancing here is not structured around a fixed choreographic script that shapes movement in specific directions; our aim is not the production of an aesthetic nor is it only to engage with the material forces at work in our movement. In dancing together on the basis of physical contact, which involves sharing in each other's embodiment, movement patterns, and the physical forces that shape our connection, we enter into an ethical relationship to one another, an ethical relationship premised on equal respect for one another's agency, care, support, and the attention and self-reflection that this requires. The choreography primarily at work here is heightened listening and maximally generous responsiveness. Gestures are responses to the questions "what do you need from my movement?", "how do I hold your weight with spacious softness as you twist around me?", and "how can my body offer your body a pathway of support while you try to balance?" We come to the practice on the basis of an ethic, and further discover the meaning and nuances of this ethic through the practice. Some dancers are more experienced, but not because they have mastered a ready-made vocabulary; it is because they have unfolded their ability to perceive and have learned the ease of movement through practice. We have all been beginners, and in an art based on improvisation we are beginners ever anew.

We set the agenda together. And we figure out what that means by trying to do so. Which movements allow for mutuality in decision-making around where to move? Which do not? If I move too quickly, you become unsure of where I am, and I lose you. If I move too slowly, you become unsure of where I am, and I lose you. If I move with unacknowledged aggression, you may become scared, and I lose you. Equal participation in guiding a movement depends on and is a result, an achievement, of a process of mutual calibration over time. I am lighter than you thought; you are more excitable than I thought. We adjust to find each other and evolve in the process. Without sufficient exploration of and experimentation with one another's subtleties, we cannot hope to become equal participants in a shared creation here or elsewhere.

The lean was too hard, I was too tense, so I couldn't support your weight, and fell out of our balance, you tumbling with me; on the floor we renegotiate and recalibrate our understanding of what each other's capabilities are, without blaming ourselves or one another — or noting our impulse to blame and putting a question mark around it. We attend to failure, to the misunderstandings in which it is sourced, and fine-tune our perceptions in its light. Sometimes we aren't sure how or whether to start again. We sit in the blockage until something new emerges, until we are ready to begin again, or to recalibrate on our own or with others.

Is this sensibility not what we aim for in a democracy? Would not our capacities to be democratic subjects be supported if we had cultural sites wherein we could actively experiment with not just leading or following, but with co-deciding in action and playfully exploring our agency? Would this not take profound root in us if this cultural site involved the intelligence of our sensitive, emotional bodies?

