

Heteronormativity in Contact Improvisation

In conversation with Andreas Hechler a cultural anthropologist we debated the predominant middle class base of CI dancers regardless of national origin. This serves as an example of how personal issues and sensitivities define the experience and condition our responses to CI.

Andreas addressed the hetero-normativity of the practise.

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This summer (2007) several women I talked to told me that they had their personal boundaries violated at this year's Freiburg Contactfestival.

Needless to mention that it was men who did it.

To me, these cases do not seem to be isolated, but rather follow a certain structure. What structure?

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Four examples may serve as an illustration:

1. Two years ago at the very same festival a male friend of mine realized that whenever he wanted to dance with men, they quite quickly went out of contact. This happened to him about ten times at one single jam.
2. At this year's festival I recounted this experience at the study lab „The shadow of CI – recognizing structures of domination and exploitation in our practice of contact improvisation“. The reaction of some of the participants: they found it problematic that my friend just wanted to dance with one gender – this wouldn't work, he was not open for an encounter, and so on. Other male participants in that very same study lab later on said that they prefer dancing only with women. They were not challenged with the argument of being not open, too much focused on gender, etc.
3. In classes as well as in jams the dominant way of bonding is man-woman-couples. To a lesser degree it is woman-woman-couples and even less man-man-couples. But it is not only that: (heterosexual) men seem to dance differently according to the gender of their partner – sensual and sensitive with a woman, rather technical with a man.
4. Even at the blind jam – which offers the possibility to get in contact with dancers one might otherwise not get in contact with – many contacters first touched each other's hair to find out the gender of the counterpart. Men suddenly touching a bald head dropped back ...

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All these examples are part of what I would call a heteronormative structure.

Heteronormativity is a normative social structure tied to the idea that human beings fall into two (and only two) distinct and complementary categories – male and female – naturally linked by mutual desire.

Coupled with this notion come ideas about what men and women „are“ or should be like. Heteronormativity relies on the firm belief in gender dichotomies (rational-emotional, activity-passivity, strength-weakness, hard-soft, taking-giving, autonomy-dependency, ...) and on the belief

that heterosexual masculinities and femininities always relate to a binary feminine or masculine other. Thus, heterosexuality is set up as „normal“. Heteronormativity in this sense works with a set of expectations, demands, and constraints produced when heterosexuality is taken as normative – it is a social structure built around traditional gender models complete with an underlying justification for the normality and appropriateness of these structures.

The consequences: any kind of behavior that does not fit into a hetero-setting is avoided.

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I not only enjoy dancing CI because it is simply enjoyable. To me, CI offers the possibility for individual and social change. Women can learn to lift men, men can learn to be lifted by a woman, (heterosexual) men can learn to be sensuous and tender to each other, ... Limited choices and possibilities due to rigid gender conceptions are expanded. CI thus has the potential for change in terms of dominant gender relations and homophobia. That is great!

I think this potential should be taken very seriously. The process of becoming a „man“ or a „woman“ is not only often quite brutal, it also limits our behavioral options. Understanding this may not only be liberating in the sense of having more options – it would also be an important contribution to ending violence. The simple fact is: the more rigid gender roles are in a society, the more heterosexuality is reinforced as the only way to desire, interact and communicate with other persons, the more violence is exerted by men over women.

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