

# ‘Notes on ‘Experiments in a Relational Field #2’’

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August 2009

*The other in all his or her forms gives me I. It is on the occasion of the other that I catch sight of me; or that I catch me at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. (Cixous 1997: 13)*

## Introduction

This paper seeks to reflect on, discuss and sum up thoughts and questions that have arisen through investigations of ‘embodied communication’ when dancing with another. I have undertaken these investigations with the help of a number of people during spring and summer 2009<sup>1</sup>. This writing is a process of thinking through practice, and an attempt to distil principles I have observed to be at play in the work.

‘Embodied communication’ is actively in play between us all the time, always, already. The focus of this dance experiment is to heighten a sensibility towards these processes and through observing them attempting to highlight, amplify and expose them, render them visible and tangible to the dancers in action as well as witnesses.

Or in other words: How might the processes in an encounter become visible and available to an audience, as moving aesthetic form? How might our engagement with one another express in movement? How *is* the performance our engagement with another? (Performance understood as a situation where something is made available and perceptible to a witness, in a live situation). What might the productive qualities of an encounter be? What might we learn through such examination? David Williams underlines these questions:

‘How might one interact with another whose difference is recognised as an active event, rather than a failure of plenitude? What are the *productive*

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Sheena MacGrandles, Rachel Sweeney, Lucy Suggert, Riikka Innanen and Isabella Oberlander for their engagement in the work during this period; for their dancing, experimenting, thinking and sharing questions, insights and observations. All have been of immense value for me.

qualities of alterity? In what ways might one work (in) an existential in-between and perceive other-wise?' (Williams 2004: 59, emphasis in original)

This experimentation thus explores a boarder land between a social engagement and a dance. The embodied communication process is a phenomenological investigation of patterns, sensations, images, dynamics and knowledge that is created when we engage and 'dialogue'<sup>2</sup> with an-other, unfolding and expressing itself as 'becoming' performance.

A relational constellation, understood as two or more autonomous yet connected subjects, is by virtue paradoxical. Running through the work, as a vital vein, as the very nerve from which the work unfolds, is the dynamic tensions that arise in the presence of paradox. Etymologically paradox means 'contrary opinion' or 'distinct from opinion'.

Paradox: paradoxon 'contrary (opinion),' para- 'distinct from' + doxa 'opinion.' (Dictionary, mac. Version 10.4.11)

In a paradox 'difference' exist, swing or oscillate together, simultaneously. The oscillation in a paradox holds two points out against each other and simultaneously pulls them together. In separating and at once connecting a critique of both points takes place: None of the two are absolute or true, and a new alternative to the two is created, however fleeting it might appear. It is this 'alternative', however fleeting it might appear, that these notes seek to describe. It is this that I seek to facilitate, expose and cherish as moments of *dance*.

This phenomenological investigation of an embodied relational and paradoxical field could be understood as 'a philosophical critical act'. Not using or pointing to philosophy, but it is rather an attempt to undertake a practical critical philosophical exercise.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Deleuze, Gilles and Parnet, Claire, (1987) *Dialogues*, London: The Athlone Press

What follows is a collection of notes taken while working in the studio. I have divided these reflections in 7 parts of different lengths and function, some are quick notes some possible starting points for longer papers. The parts can be read in succession or in random order. The material that has arisen is ultimately interconnected, however the somewhat artificial make up of the parts serves to support my own clarification and hopefully facilitates some degree of subtle reflection. The parts are:

1. Embodied communication
2. Entering the relational – autonomous and complicit at once
3. Ways of behaviour that hinder the unfolding of the work and what it would be instead
4. Reactive – Response-able
5. Production/creation of ‘material’
6. Movement as manifestation of an encounter
7. Making space for things to ‘happen’

### **1. Embodied communication**

Communication performs an exchange between ‘I’ and my environment, including people in it, and is thus located in a paradoxical span. The idea of communication being *embodied* is a proposition of giving the shared dynamics of communication tangible form. The etymological roots are:

Communication: from the verb *communicare* ‘to share’. (Dictionary, mac. Version 10.4.11)

Embodied: be an expression of or give a tangible or visible form to (an idea, quality, or feeling) • provide (a spirit) with a physical form.

‘Embodied communication’ could thus etymologically be explained as: an expression of and visible form given to a shared field.

In giving form to the shared implied in this notion of ‘embodied communication’, motility and patterns formed through motility, appear in the paradox of connecting

differences. These dynamics or movements could refer to both the natural world as well as social interaction.

1. On the level of natural phenomena: vibration, oscillation, calibration, balancing (fine and constant adjustment) resonance, circulation, electricity
2. Social level: negotiation, exchange, dialogue, conversation, transmission, relating

This is an experiment with how we might access these dynamics, how these dynamics can 'take place' in us, how we might participate in such 'swings'. Driving questions are:

What are the conditions that allow exchange to take place, what does it imply?

How do I become available for a shared field, how do I make contact with the other?

How does it feel, and how does it appear to a viewer, when contact is established?

How can I reach out beyond my physical body, which restricts me in space, and offer a receptive contact surface?

How can we practice being with 'whatever there is' and allow surprising material to arise between us?

How can we practice *play* together?

## **2. Entering the relational – autonomous and complicit at once**

A person entering an engagement with an-other brings an extraordinary diversity of material inherent in them: their past, socio-cultural background, physical training or not, opinions, beliefs ect. An individual's specific attitude and sense of their physicality at the given time will produce certain dynamics and patterns. Humour for example is an obvious example of way of thinking that produces and holds a specific timing.

Thus what takes place in the space is formed by thought, opinion, energy, emotions, atmospheres, tensions and releases, physical and spatial preferences, imagination, fantasies. Everyone offer different rhythms, different agendas/goals and intentions. And a person is engaged in marking and re-configuring territories: physical, energetic

and emotional territories. A person is naturally engaged in a complex set of 'multiplicity in motion'.

Two people dancing together hold a potent and complex swing in an abundance of 'materials' and rhythms, a play of negotiation of boundaries, a participation in a paradoxical interface between the two and their environment.

However, this fruitful interface-in-motion is not a given and necessarily constant state of being. Being lost, or having a non-encounter, seems to be a condition for grasping the productive agency that is offered through connectedness. 'I find my bearings where I become lost'(Cixous 1997: 8) Cixous explains. The ability to feel disconnectedness as shyness or loneliness or pain in some way, self conscious separation, without opting out and without covering up with a lot of action, seems to be the condition for building a space in which the connection can take place in a way that allows each individual to both retain their individuality and be fully available and in-motion with the other.

Paradoxically entering the relational and becoming available to an-other, means at once retaining ones individuality and becoming receptive to and interested in the other, being able to be moved by the other. Becoming available means to offer oneself into a meeting place and simultaneously become receptive to the other.

Receptivity does thus not mean losing myself into the other but means offering a surface for the other to tap into, and for the other to become receptive towards. A field of mutual vulnerability is established. There seems to be many more variables, openings, in movement from a vulnerable place and this sense of many-sidedness and possibility is something I experience as engaging, surprising and delightful to watch.

This 'energy surface', or resource made available in action seem only to read clearly to the other if I am connected to my weight, to my volume and to a movement from the *desire* to move rather than composition and calculation. The practice of staying connected to my desire to move invites a notion of *standing behind* my action, or being

*clear and readable* to the other, or *convincing* in my action. It offers fullness in space, a full body, glorious mass <sup>3</sup>, available to vibrate and generate energy.

If I feel and know where I am, I become intimate with me. When I become intimate I become available for the other.

### **3. Ways of behaviour that hinder the unfolding of the work and what it would be instead**

- Self-conscious control: an urge to *show* what we do and a preoccupation with what it is or might be rather than allowing meaning to arise: **freedom of play and genuine curiosity**
- Pondering or hanging out in the state of listening, getting spaced out and not able to get into action: **activity and awake readiness**
- Impatience: Not listening to what happens, anticipating action, not waiting to receive information from the other: **patience and listening**

### **4. Reactive and respons-able**

An essential insight and understanding through this work is that what I do, my action-thought-emotion body, has an effect on what is around me. Whatever I do, think I do, or whatever I don't do, I send out information and the other is obliged to integrate this 'information' in their 'system', and I am obliged to the same. My presence has resonance, a consequence, in my surrounding, and my surrounding including other people has resonance in me.

Through attentiveness towards the effect my presence and action has in the other, I receive a signal back to me, which produce an impulse for another action, the other resonates in me - a feedback system of signals is produced. When a series of electrical signals 'tunes' – or finds a very fast pace of exchange, I believe it to be play, or dance, or a kind of music perhaps.

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<sup>3</sup> '...the root of the word 'glory'. Glory means a weight, not something that's brilliant, shiny. When one thinks of 'glory', one thinks of stars, of things that shine; it's not that at all; it's weight, density.'  
(Louppe 1996:4)

Responding to an impulse from the other, or allowing signals to have effect and manifest through action does not mean however that I am not autonomous and that I do not have choice. Choice lies in how I choose to deal with the impulse I receive, it is a question of being responsible or ‘response-able’<sup>4</sup>, as opposed to reactive. The reactive mode somewhat being beyond choice, and perhaps a mode which creates conflict or least perpetuates old paths of doing-thinking rather than inviting an energised freshness to the manifestation of an encounter.

A reactionary mode could thus be understood as a mode where I get back exactly what I send out. The situation is perpetuated, it stays the same.

A responsive mode could be understood as a mode where I have choice of the expression I send out. I can own my own output when I have the patience to allow input to go through my intelligent psycho-physical system. When I have the ability and interest to accept and use the consequence of my output: to enter into a wheel of exchange. This notion of responsiveness implies a rigorous practice of the paradox imbedded in allowing oneself to be moved by the other and simultaneously being fully autonomous and in possession of choice.

The moments of reaction is perhaps where the first ‘firing’ inside comes about, the initial trigger of energy. Responding means taking it on and being able to respond to those energies, which are produced in/out-side: being playful with the fire. Reactions set up the scenario and by allowing attentive listening and sensibility towards principles of the movements of exchange, there is a chance of getting insight in patterns of engagement. There is a chance of being able to *use* them, change them, being playful with them, relate to them and begin to dance with the ‘situation’. A ‘situation’ is in this case the reality of two or more dancers in a studio, the tasks they are given and what each one brings to the dance.

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<sup>4</sup> The term response-able is borrowed from David Williams. See: Williams, David (1996) ‘Working (in) the In-between: Contact Improvisation as an Ethical Practice’ *Writings on Dance The French Issue* 15

## 5. Production/creation of ‘material’

What are the *productive* qualities of alterity? (Williams 2004: 59, emphasis in original)

What are the productive agencies of this meeting place, this interface, in terms of production of performance material? In this vibrating situation, where ‘I’ meet my surrounding there is a no collapse into the other, no sameness, neither rejection, but rather a holding out from each other in full engagement. In the swing that happens in the interface between different components, images, movement or a certain ‘music’ is produced.

This ‘material’ seems to be produced through us paying attention and resonating with what-there-is, what *arise* or *emerge*. Our whole sensate systems resonate with something and our attention to this resonance is what creates ‘material’, the resonance between differences is the productive agent.

Through the practice of an active act of letting things be intact in themselves and yet engaging fully with what there is, unpredictable and surprising ‘material’ emerge and resonate in our bodies. It is this ‘material’: rhythms, sensations, intensities, constellations, emotions, images and dramatic situation that constitute the ‘thick’ of the dance, the ‘content’ of the performance.

The unpredictable and surprising feature of this ‘material’ is both a delight while working and also a vital opening to new information, a way to ‘consult’ the un-known where something much more rich and complex than the rational mind is able to work out, may come forth and manifest as aesthetic form.

The material, which could be understood as a kind of learning surface, arises through an exchange and communication between differences. And there is yet another exchange taking place: the performer establishes an exchange with the ‘material’ itself, the material resonates back to the performers, and this extra round of exchange in some way produces a virtual *third* body between the two. When ‘material’ is experienced as a sort of third body, as something that does not belong to any of the

two, it is the sign that something has actually been produced. The encounter, the communication, has become productive and thus concrete (however fleeting) and possible to share as performance.

In the process of attentive listening to the resonance of this 'third body', the performer him/her self *becomes* an interface between the other, the material and the self. Thus in moments of engagement with an-other the individual is in a state of *becoming* and is not only creating material but is *being created*. A process of 'being created' could be described as: a simultaneous receptivity and sensitivity towards my own psycho-physical reality and the Other.

This creation of material and simultaneous creation of our selves, is not an extraordinary process but something that happens between us all the time already and always.

It is important in this attempt to describe what might be produced in a meeting field and how it might happen, to underline that this 'third body' or material is a ephemeral phenomenon, and thus not something that can be 'had' arrested or kept. I imagine these emotions, images, sensations as a kind of pattern, formation or 'thickening' of energy. The practice I suggest here is to resonate with these thickenings, and surrender them in the same instant. The surrender of 'material' gives way for new, it is a movement and aliveness. Somewhat like a meteor burning through the atmosphere, the 'thickening' of energy, which is 'material', burns in my own atmosphere in the act of surrender, produces light and energy and becomes my fuel.

## **6. Movement as manifestation of an encounter**

How does material, which is produced and resonates in the flesh become available and tangible to others? Other performers and people witnessing.

Different patterns, qualities and intensities of *movement* are the actual concrete manifestation of the content produced. Movement is rhythm, tempo and direction and the catalyst that holds and enables sensations, emotions, thoughts ect. In other words, 'material' come into being, becomes visible and manifest, through bringing it into

action/ allowing them to flow outwards through gesture. This gesture, which I understand to be possible with the whole body, could also be described as: giving action to an intuition or a sensation. Levin explains:

Etymology tells us that ‘to gesture’ means ‘to bear,’ ‘to bring forth,’ ‘to give birth,’ and ‘to make appear’.’ (Levin 1999:137 +138)

In this context movement gestures out from a connected place that is both you and me. Our shared space, our inter-connectedness is opened and brought forth, rendered visible.

In the difference between other and I, there is an inherent imperfection. We are not the same and thus there is movement. This notion of movement, has its heart in the imperfect, and is produced, comes forth, in an unpredictable play of imperfect connections. Relating to and gesturing towards an-other is imperfect by virtue and through playing and listening to the dance of our difference, we are given a deep sense of mobility and potential.

Movement as gesture according to Levin, builds a ‘bridge’ to the other.

‘– gesture(s) of an embodiment always in question with regard to its openness to the otherness of all that is other.’ (Levin 1999: 135)

Gesture in this sense is a simultaneously act of connecting and the expression of the connection, its form. The person moving is a part of ‘the bridge’ and the interface itself in which the movement takes place. In such a happening of movement everyone implied is affected, moved, changed, created.

### **7. Making space for movement to ‘happen’**

We are cultivating a discipline of listening to impulses for movement. Why do we move? When are we moved? Where is the impulse for movement, in the now in the real, not as an external image of form or a ‘have to’ or ‘should look like’ but rather as an expression of living matter responding and being in it’s changing environment. Rivca Ruben explains how *movement* in a conversation based on verbal exchange

may come through finding alternatives to 'have to' or 'should' as for example giving suggestions and offering invitations and questions.

Through the practice of simultaneous listening to our impulses and the other, we work towards cultivating a space where movement is 'given' to us. Where we don't need to invent anything, where movement comes about by itself through the act of listening to it, by making space for it, by allowing response to an invitation, suggestion or question.

However this space of mutual response is not 'just there' and we often get stuck. Getting stuck means fixing in one place for example having very low energy or hyper tense energy:

A strategy or a 'way out' when there is low energy, feelings of dizziness or tiredness we might find engagement by faking it, pushing forward, just moving, moving on, just 'giving it a go' what ever that means. Getting into our selves, finding our own weight and desire.

When there is high tension, lot's of adrenalin, hectic energy or nervousness and the engagement becomes rushed or shallow, it seems useful to slacken tension in the body, draining it out like emptying a bowl of water. Allow movement to come through by making space for it to rejuvenate, detaching, not interfering wilfully, letting be, stepping aside and giving way.

In one exercise we practice receiving each other's shifting intensities through our backs, and learn a great deal about how our attitude towards the other registers energetically and physically, and get information about what it might mean to give space for the other, give space for movement to happen in the engagement:

I project towards Rachel's back, I offer her a push, I want her to move. Rachel remains in her place. After a while I give up. The moment I slacken my desire, to give her an impulse, and in some way connect back to myself, she moves. Space is created for her to move, through my opening and slackening my energy, through drawing my

‘demand’ back. Thus the creative engine in this case is not *making* but an act of ‘stepping back’, ‘loosing the grip on something’, ‘letting be’ once the connection is established. It becomes a practice of...

‘...letting the flowers grow, recognizing that each persons genius is to be themselves’(Hederman 2000: 41)

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Unpublished translation by David Williams (2008)

Published as:

Louppe, Laurence (ed.) (1994), 'Gravitational Space' Holmes, Brian (translation),

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Dictionary and thesaurus from Mac version 10.04.11

### **Workshops:**

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Ruben, Rivca, workshop: 'Communicating with Clarity' Daghdha Space, Limerick, Ireland, June 2009