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Photo: Emma Kohn

Pulsing and Embracing Contact Improvisation in Cuba

by Marion Ramírez

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This past spring, I taught and participated in Encuentro Contact Cuba 2018, the first Contact Improvisation [CI] festival in Cuba and my fourth visit to La Havana. The festival, organized by Sofia Barriga Monteverde, Paula Zacarias, and Lucy Mahler, included participant/dancers from Cuba, Ecuador, Argentina, Italy, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Dominican Republic, the United States, and Sweden. I relished teaching in Spanish and in the heat, as I do also when teaching in my home country, Puerto Rico, without having to translate myself both in verbal and movement languages. This experience also awakened a host of questions and observations on the play of improvisation in everyday life, and it impacted my CI practice at this gathering and beyond.

Improvising Cuba

With a sense of familiarity and surprise, I feel I'm in Cuba for the first time. There are no advertisements for products or stores to seduce me to spend money on things I don't need; I am not spending hours on media or checking personal messages on my electronic devices. Most people don't have these devices here and immersing myself in mine to try to "get connected" doesn't feel right. Like others from the festival's group, I struggle with breaking the habit of constructing a sense of control over my daily activities by relying on GPS, texting, etc. Instead, we have to trust that the plans we make will manifest, we will find the group in the city when we travel, we will get to places. We have to stay present, pay attention to our bodies, our senses, our intuition. I look at people and let them see me, I interact with them, holding silence together, smiling, asking directions, having conversations while cooling in the shade. Every minute feels like

an hour. I want to savor each moment and give in to the slower sense of time on the island.

Improvising through our days includes being aware of the resources available to us and how nothing can be taken for granted: drinking water, shower water, soap, food, bed, roof, walls, napkins. At the same time, I feel the tension and reality that some of us are only experiencing this for a week; we will go home to more resources and comfort, to the traps of consumerism and electronic devices. The question of the many faces of freedom comes back. The state of presence and improvisation I experience here is multilayered, involving not only dance, but also my thoughts about insufficient food and the inability of some to explore and discover new places outside the island. As we discuss our perspectives and experiences, we become more aware of political complexities in the choices we make and in the cultural climates we navigate. This informs how we practice movement and the ways we are together. This all becomes an essential part of the festival.



Photo: Emma Kohn

Improvising the Festival

Our first dance improvisation starts by collaborating to secure many panels of cardboard on a cement floor. Together we figure out how to align, tape, and dry them, getting to know each other as we compose the surface that will host our indoor gatherings.

As the week progresses, the workshops and events proposed by the festival's teachers are different yet complimentary approaches to CI: exploring direct vision, finding ways of entering empty spaces between dancers, using sound to match another dancer, touching to open spaces within the spine, moving in response to the circulation of blood, doing tango on the sand with eyes closed, dancing salsa while trying out both partnering roles, pulling and pressing against each other while staying safe. Every day, as the studio closes in the late afternoon, a facilitated session continues outside, in the plazas, on the floating muelle (dock), or on the beach. Passersby observe our explorations and dancers respond to the rhythms, colors, smells, and surfaces of the public spaces and its people. I feel an overall sense of curiosity and openness to our dance. It feels welcomed. Some people ask us questions and offer their impressions, and others join us in the studio later in the festival. The group gets bigger as the days pass.

I appreciate the formal and informal discussions with festival participants and facilitators about how we experience CI practice in different countries and how we facilitate this practice within the Latin American context. We share strategies on how to challenge social behaviors related to gender and touch by establishing clear agreements that expand our awareness beyond our social dancing and interactions—so much a part of how we communicate.

Improvising Teaching

Knowing that many of the participants are new to CI, I introduce an improvisation structure that celebrates every person's dancing language without pressuring them to show their CI skills. The main focus of my first workshop is for a soloist to enter the empty space and establish a "movement song" in silence using whichever movement language is available to them in the moment. A second person enters and somehow matches the song of the first dancer, not using the same movement, but following the melody they perceive through the qualities they feel and observe. After some time, both find a third song/force that they ride together, dancing as close as they wish, without physically touching, until they find an end and exit the space. In Puerto Rico and Cuba, I strongly experience musicality and melody in the way we speak, touch, interact, move, and connect with our bodies. Here, the search for the third song/force emerges smoothly and the music becomes visible through the dancers' bodies. The energy and space between them becomes electric in the silence.

A spontaneous jam follows these duets, and everyone agrees to "break" the rules and join in. We hear and feel, sing and touch, hum, stomp, scream, whisper, partner, solo, run, shake, and spiral. It is a song with many parts, volumes, and moments of silence. The polyrhythmic percussiveness of our bodies in syncopation reminds me where I am—in Cuba. We orbit the magnetic force we create together, bathed in the sweat produced by the intense heat and by our bodies' weight and presence.

As we gather in a final circle, I feel the stillness vibrating. We share our experiences using words and gestures; there is laughter, tears, release. I am honored to facilitate this experience in a place where rituals, such as the embodiment of the Orishas in the Cuban Yoruba tradition, are practiced and the dancing body is celebrated as a vessel for spiritual connection.

As I walk the narrow streets of Havana Vieja from the workshop to the hostel, I find myself thinking about how CI has been meaningful in my life in the ways I can support and be supported by others, the ways it embodies feminist philosophy and ideals of democracy that I identify with. However, I do sometimes still perceive myself as an outsider, even after fifteen years of practice and ten years teaching. I understand that CI is a culturally specific form created in a particular context by a certain group of people just like any other movement form. Who is it for? Who has the privilege to practice equality and letting go, yielding and pushing against a stranger's body? But tonight I feel at home, inspired by CI's principles. I can enter fully into the research from my experience, embracing all that I am.



Photo: Carla Ríos

Improvising with the Heart

The next morning, after a long night of salsa dancing in Havana, I lead another workshop. At the studio, people are still half asleep, processing all their experiences, yet present. While sitting in the opening circle, I respond to my body and the feeling of the group and decide to change my plan for the class. I invite our hands to feel the pulse of our hearts and we continue following that theme for the next three hours, falling into the surfaces that support the heart in the chest, moving with arterial and venous flow, letting the heart circulation expand to the hands and feet, and reaching out to each other with the quality of its expression. Beautiful dances emerge.

When I return to Philadelphia, I learn that this workshop occurred on the nineteenth day of my new pregnancy, the day in which the fetus's heart cells start pulsing, making its initial rhythm as an organ of a new creature in formation. I realize that there was a creative energy that was within me, its emerging new life responding to this group of wonderful dancers. I now finish this writing on the last days before the birth of the baby whose heart started to pump in Cuba.

[Encuentro Contact Cuba 2018](#), Havana Cuba, April 2018.

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