Introduction

Contact Improvisation (CI) is a dance form initiated in 1972 by the dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton and his colleagues.

Characterized by the encounter between two or more dancers and deeply grounded in improvisation and the development of bodily awareness, it was influenced by civil rights and anti-war movements.

This research aims to address the practice of CI as an example of the study of intersubjectivity.

Through this study we will provide a philosophical account of the kinaesthetic experience of dancing 'off balance' highlighting the role played by socio-cultural and historical factors in shaping skilled movement experience.

Methods

At this early stage, two different groups of Contact Improvisers have been considered. One based in Sydney (Australia) led by choreographer Alejandro Rolandi and since August 2014 a second one based in Bologna (Italy).

This research employs a phenomenological and mixed-method approach. Sources of inspiration include:

- Merleau-Ponty’s carnal intersubjectivity
- Ethnographic data-gathering techniques
- Assessment of personality differences
- Participant observation
- Somatic attention
- Thick participation
- Carnal sociology

1. Framework

Through the analysis of biographical and ethnographic works as well as the active first person descriptions of bodily perceptions in play with CI, this work will reframe the relationship between cognitive and sensory structures in the phenomenal experience of the mindful dancing body.

2. Sensory Structures

CI privileges certain sensory modalities:

- internal awareness
- a predominance of the sense of touch over sight
- and of proprioceptive attention over vision

3. Bodily Knowledge

Considering how thought and movement are interrelated and the formation and transmission of knowledge as intersubjective, in CI the body emerges as the locus for the coexistence of both kinaesthetic autonomy and interkinaesthetic connectivity.

4. ‘Falling’ and Spatial Disorientation

By focusing on contact improvisers’ physical experience of ‘falling’, or ‘disorientation’, this work considers how metaphors shape and are shaped, enacted and performed by dancers’ kinaesthetic experiences.

While, as cultural metaphor, ‘Falling’ is often associated with negative values such as ‘Failure’ in CI falling, as well as being ‘lost’ or ‘suspended’ are perceived as chances to open up multiple possibilities and different orientations.

5. Metaphors and Technologies of Self

Metaphors are rooted in bodily experiences that are interconnected with the physical and cultural environment. According to Foucault, certain practices or technologies instil in the subject certain attitudes or habits that shape the self.

CI as a technique of the body encompasses radical political potential and personal transformation.

Conclusions

CI is at the nexus of aesthetics and politics. We consider both its cultural and historical context and its intrinsic aperspectival or multiperspectival structure. Yet the level of the personal is also at play. It is characterized by the development of a ‘habit of attention’. This research displays CI as an intersubjective technique of awareness of the self, which presents an embodied alternative to the conceptual metaphors of space and failure. By shedding light on the role played by aesthetics and politics embedded in culture-specific technologies of the body in shaping the perception of world and self, this work will contribute to the understanding of skilled bodies’ forms of intelligence.

References: