

Traces of touch: making contact with the floor, walls and ceilings through dance improvisation

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The floor supports me when I am moving, just as the walls and the corners do. I can always fall back on them, they are solid and never fail to do their task. My movements are only possible because of the floor, the corner and the wall. Through their touch my movement becomes a possibility. Poor floor and poor walls. Always waiting for a fugitive touch, for the come and go of bodies that slip into their territories, use their skin and momentarily take a hold of them. Bodies are travellers, only when they sleep (or die) they completely surrender to the floor and find comfort in its solidness.

(2)

The floor is a skin. The walls are skins. My body is a skin. The skin has knowledge, '*ichi una*', as the Cashinahua in Peru call it (Howes, 2005). Skin knowledge is the knowledge that one acquires 'through the skin, through the feel of the sun, the wind, the rain and the forest' (p.27). When I for example go the toilet at night, my touch sense together with the memory of my skin brings me to the appropriate place. Do floors and walls have a skin memory too?

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The environment is imprinted on our skin. The sense of touch can register the general and specific at once. We can for example feel the sensation of the wind, the way it bounces against our bodies, while we feel the tickle of a leaf at the same time. Touch can incorporate different sensations at the same time, ranging from the local to the global. This simultaneous tuning-in-and-out seems to be a unique property of touch. If sight could do the same, we would be able to 'see the blue expanse of the sky, and at the same time be looking at grains of sand on the ground' (Howes, 2005, p.28).

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In modern Western society we rarely have full contact with the floor and the walls. Only children have regular full body contact with the floor. Adults perceive the ground 'as dirty or even contaminating' (Howes, 2005, p.29) and in daily actions we tend to ignore the floor as much as we possible can. We no longer sleep on the floor, nor do we sit on the floor. We use chairs and beds instead. On the streets this becomes even more apparent since only the homeless, intoxicated and the insane sit on the ground. In Western society we seem to be 'out of touch with the ground of our existence' (Howes, 2005, p.30).

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The earth is covered with skin. We have a skin-to-skin relationship with the earth. Through touch we gain tacit knowledge of its surfaces but also of the hidden materials underneath its skin. When we dig in the earth, for example on a summer day at the beach, we get in touch

with all kind of textures. First our hands meet soft silvery sand – a type of sand that does not mold easily into a shape. When we dig deeper and deeper the sand slowly turns into mud, a substance that by now is easily molded in different kind of shapes. In between we find all kind of textures: stones, shells and all kind of little animals that have been hiding underneath the surface. In old mythology it is believed that the earth has feelings and needs. 'The earth is able 'to feel the prick of the plow and the stab of the shove' ((Howes, 2005, p.31). Could this also be true for the walls, corners and the floor? Do they feel how our bodies rub, lean, glide, push, stand, lie, roll, fall against its surfaces?

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Touch, I realized today when I was working in the studio, connects us with others, with the environment, with the surfaces and textures of the world. At this very moment I am supported by the floor, I sense how my feet and buttocks make contact with the floor. In fact, the only moment when I am free of touch is when I jump in the air. In this micro-moment I experience a sense of freedom: no ties, no connections, just temporarily floating in the air. However, even in this jump I am not entirely free since I am still touched by the air that surrounds me.

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Contact improvisation, in the broadest sense of the word, can be defined as 'a readiness to engage in with-ness' (Sarco-Thomas, 2014, p.184). We engage with the environment, with other(s). We 'rub against the world' (Juhan, in Jussilainen, 2014, p.116): this rubbing produces openings, holes of contact that awaken in us the feeling that we are part of a bigger whole. Touch produces interconnecting maps: it weaves invisible lines between my feet and the floor, my elbow and the table, my fingers and the keyboard, my knee and my other knee, my finger and my mouth etc. My body is 'never in a tactile nowhere' (Ratcliffe, 2008, p.30), I am never in absence of touch. Remember, even when I jump, I am touched by the air. Ihde speaks of a *touch field*, a field of connectedness between me and the world: 'When the whole of my touch field touches and is touched by the surrounding world, I realize how intimate is the I world relation in touch. Through touch, I am constantly 'in touch' with that which surrounds me' (1983, p.99).

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The role of the skin in touch is to provide passages for intensities and affects to travel through. The skin is much more than a boundary, a soft outer tissue that protects the body against potentially harmful substances and excessive water loss. The skin is porous, it allows elements of otherness to pass through. 'Porosity constitutes the body as a threshold or passage, not strictly defined by inside/outside but rather by multiple surfaces open to other surfaces' (Fullagar, 2001, p.179). Through touch otherness is inscribed on our bodies. This otherness destabilizes the body, multiple centres arise and local touch points are temporarily created that produce a potentiality of connections between body segments and the environment. Knee against hip, foot against floor, hand against wall. In touch, we allow ourselves to be altered by strangeness. Dey and Tomas (2014) refer to this as change through exchange.

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Touch is a relational movement that includes both ‘potential and actual physical points of contacts’ (Manning, in Pethybridge, 2014, p.183). Let’s take a closer look at this sentence. First of all, touch is a movement. Touch is rooted in the motor capacities of the body. In other words, we need to move in order to experience touch. I can only grasp the spatial and qualitative features of the environment by moving, only then I am able to sense the surface, contours and textures of this ‘otherness’ that now passes through me (Fugali, n.d.). Gibson (1962) considers active touch as an activity that involves tactile scanning of the environment: affects and intensities are produced through the variations and differences in tactile movements. The touch experience is the result of a coming together of movements of one’s own body and the movements of the environment in the in-between space, a space that Steve Paxton (1975) defines as the rolling point of contact.

Let’s return to Manning’s phrase. First: touch is a movement. Second: touch is relational. In the between-ness of movements (Manning refers to this as the interval) togetherness starts to take on shape. In-between the next and past movements, a potentiality of movements awaits for us. We can sense these potential movements through micro-perception, even if they have not yet come into existence. In the in-between ‘holes become emergent openings’ (p.1), felt intensities and affects pass through, new connections arise with the becoming of movement. Manning states that ‘relational movement is moving the relationship’ (2009, p.2), it is the creation of an interval in which one moves together with the other, the object and the environment. It is a co-constituted movement through which the interval becomes palpable.

I lean against the wall. I give weight to the wall. I fold around the wall. The wall presses back. It seems to resist my touch. I feel its coldness pressing unto my skin. I let the wall fold around me. The becoming-wall is a hard practice. It is not easy to negotiate with its materiality: its robustness, solidness and stableness. But even walls are porous too, openings can be found, walls breath, they can receive and pass on heat for example (Graig & Grinham, 2017). It’s a comfort to know that there are openings, local flows, potentialities of touch – I just need to persist in finding them.

I am looking for holes and gaps in the floor and the wall.

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It’s a mistake to think that walls and floor are purely solid and stable. They are *solid and stable enough*: walls and floors can resist my weight, the weight of many people, they can resist powerful forces such as storms and earthquakes. However, walls and floors can become fluid too.

Professor Thomas Parnell (1881-1948) believed that substances that appear to be solid, are in fact fluid. In 1927 he started an experiment, known as the pitch-drop experiment. He wanted to show that pitch – also known as bitumen or asphalt – appears to be solid but in fact flows, although very slowly. Parnell heated a sample of pitch and poured it into a glass funnel with a

sealed stem. Then he allowed it to settle for three years. In 1930 he cut the funnel's stem. To date only nine drops have fallen. Interesting enough, it takes in between 7 to 13 years to form a drop, but only a tenth of a second to fall.

Are floors and walls fluid too? How much time would it need before drops start to fall from ceiling, the floor and walls?

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I have been working now for several weeks alone in the studio. Although I work with the walls and the floor, I wonder if what I do fits under the umbrella of CI. The term CI suggests a coming together of several bodies (with a minimum of two). But then again: what kind of bodies are suggested here? Human bodies? Animal bodies? The bodies of organisms? Could you do a CI with plants and flowers? Could you do a CI with the walls and the floor? Can walls and floors be considered as bodies? (Taken into consideration that walls and floors are porous, they breath, have a skin, are fluid and stable and instable at once).