

Commonalities & Distinctions

Body-Mind Centering® & Contact Improvisation

Interview with Otto Ramstad

by Grégory Chevalier

After a one-week workshop called “outside—in—inside—out” led by Otto Ramstad at 1001 Festival in Grenoble, France, in July 2017, workshop translator and participant Grégory Chevalier sat down with Otto for a conversation.

Grégory: *When was the last time you were in a contact festival, and what does it mean for you to teach an intensive class here?*

Otto: I have not been to a Contact Festival since 1999, and this is my first time teaching at a contact festival. Contact is a big part of my dance heritage. I was in Grenoble ten years ago with the previous organizer of the festival, Isabelle Üski. She invited us [BodyCartography] to work in outdoor spaces.

G: *You also decided to give this intensive outdoors in a garden; why is working outdoors important for you?*

O: I question the constant of “flat floor” in the experiment of dancing. In western art dance, most dance is done on a flat floor. It is wonderful to be on a flat surface; it does something to your nervous system, to the development of your body, and to your sense of adaptability. Evolutionarily, being inside and on a perfectly flat floor is a relatively recent phenomenon. I think there is something to be gained from being outside. Evolution happened in these places, moving on different surfaces where we have to adjust. My feeling is that we lose something by not being outdoors. The physical body adapts—our circulatory system, our ability to adapt to the cold, for example.

G: *It sounds to me that maintaining health requires physical challenges. In a studio, many times we say it is important to feel comfortable, safe, warm...*



Otto Ramstad dancing at RIFF Talks 4—Chaos, School for Contemporary Dance and Thought, Northampton, Massachusetts, March, 2016.

photo © Peter Raper

O: Outside, you calibrate with the environment to make a relationship with it. That takes time. It is very interesting to do deeper somatic practice in a more challenging environment. When I was here ten years ago, we worked in a large river, with stones and cold. We did mostly authentic movement and scores.

G: *In your intensive, you taught mainly Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering. Is there a particular reason for that?*

O: In the first couple of days before the festival, we had a couple of jams for the festival team; there were like 20 people. I was just coming back into the context of CI in a really full way, though for people here, this is their primary practice. I thought that I really want to support people with the body-systems material of BMC to go into the CI form. The choreography of contact is important because it is proposed by surviving gravity, having someone's center on top of your center and using your skeletal structure to be able to do it. But you can easily get into an averaging of those positions, rather than responding to the mass of your partner in the moment. Then the dance is just going through positions, and it is almost like it becomes socialized. We move to certain positions because we agree that that's what the dance is.

I wanted to open up for people that "moving while touching" is distinct from Contact Improvisation. I changed the title so that you go into the sensations of your body in the moment in a different way. That's what practicing BMC has done for me. For me, BMC heightens the feeling of improvisation in CI.

G: *Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen is often mentioning CI as a useful somatic practice. Why can BMC and CI support each other so well?*

O: Looking at our bodies as generators of movement is one of the most profound propositions in CI. We generate the movement from our body and from interaction with another person's body. In BMC, it is the same: we are the material, so the two forms can give to each other. There is also a developmental repatterning potential in both approaches. BMC looks more directly at actual patterns. In CI, moving with our spine horizontal and parallel to the ground is developmental. It repatterns the way your muscles are organized in a healthy way.

When we are working with touch, we are working with bonding. Think about children, how much touch they ask for and how much you give them. What touch does for their development is huge; they basically live on the body of another person. Not just for their food, nursing, but also for their development. What CI can offer to BMC is a full-body version of hands-on work.

G: *The way you dance is very special. It reminds me of children dancing; it grabs my attention.*

O: I spent my life creating my own movement. I did not go to dance school. I have almost no knowledge of ballet and contemporary dance technique. I started dancing when I was six years old. I went to the community center near my house two streets away. The teacher there was Suzanne River, who was a BMC teacher. We did creative movement, improvisation, and BMC. I studied with her for eight years and was in her children's dance company, Kids Make Magic Moves. When I turned 14 years old, I stopped taking classes and was mostly skateboarding and snowboarding.

G: *So what brought you back to dance?*

O: When I finished high school, I didn't go to university right away. I was living in the mountains in Colorado and Idaho snowboarding and went to Central America twice. I decided to go back to university at 21 and chose a progressive-education school called



Otto dancing as a young boy, ca. 1982. Home movie, Prairie Farm, WI.

still from film by Josie Winship

Evergreen State College in Washington. I signed up for a class about people who had chosen alternative lives in art and activism outside the constraints of society. In 1996, the summer before school started, I was somewhat out of touch and the school called my mom to say “your son’s class is full, so he’s going to have to sign up for another class,” and she picked for me Introduction to Western Music and Dance. She knew I liked dancing before. That’s how I got back into dance, from my mom. My mom is a visual artist. At six years old, she saw that I liked to move and signed me up for my first dance class. But even at that young age when she asked if I wanted to go, I said, “No, I am not so sure.” She felt that maybe I had already internalized that dance is something that boys don’t do. She felt there was some interruption, a societal interruption, within my answer, and she said she wanted me to just try the first class. This was one of the only things that she insisted that I do.

G: *Your first class choice was activism; how is it present in your life?*

O: In the BMC community, activism is coming up. Bonnie started directly addressing it in workshops, for us to actively bring the ideas from our work with somatics into the culture and not just to work with people “already in the room.” In workshops, she asks people to stand up to identify themselves with different distinctions, from psychotherapy,



Participants in BodyCartography workshop, Dix, France, ca. 2008.

dance, bodywork, and she includes political activism or community organizing. And she says: “A lot of you are making workshops happen; you should stand up under activism.” This is something that we have to be present with now.

It is tricky, though, because you can’t make someone have a somatic experience or bring someone into improvisation; someone has to *want* to do it. That’s the puzzle of thinking about activism with the work we are doing. In our context, the sense of care for each other is very important; we can get deep experiences from this work, from CI and from BMC. That’s a base; we care for the connection—the physiological base for empathy. It’s very profound. But contemporary and experimental dance is still a very select group. My partner in BodyCartography, Olive Bieringa, and I are always very busy with the audience experience; it is very important within our work.

G: *What do you mean by “audience experience”?*

O: I mean to consider the audience’s experience and to choreograph the way we are with the audience. What do we want the audience experience to be? How can we move from spectatorship to experience? I don’t mean audience participation; I mean body experience, transmission, the setup of the performance, where the chairs are—are there chairs?—and sometimes audience instructions. To go more towards giving people the experience of being inside of a dance.

G: *So that’s maybe a way for people to have a somatic experience without going to a workshop?*

O: Yes, and it definitely happens. Not only in the work we are doing, but it also happens in ballet; people connect with the person’s body on stage, and

photo © Otto Ramstad

they have an experience. It's moving, people feel moved emotionally, and there's a kinesthetic empathy.

G: *In your work, the somatic experience with the audience is primary; the audience feeling must be different?*

O: You know the choreographer William Forsythe? I don't really connect with his work in a theater, but I once had the opportunity to see his dancers in a studio—with their rehearsal clothes on, not performing, I am closer to them; I am on the same level. In the plain lighting of the studio, it was amazing. I felt connected to them.

G: *I understand. The conditions proposed by a theater can create distance with the audience, but it also provides a space in which we can ideally pay attention to each other.*

O: The theater gives us cultural signals: "It is time to pay attention and to look at this place." But the animal experience

of being close to another person invites a different kind of attention. "Look at this animal, look at this person, what are they doing?" And the engagement that you have as a performer—how do you access that? I am not against "showing" dance for performance. Perfecting form and making shapes and beauty—that's also moving, to a degree. I guess it's that sensing, feeling, and action; if you are feeling the dance, it transmits in a different way.

G: *Six dancers of our intensive did a sharing performance of the work we did at the end of the workshop. What did you see?*

O: When you did your sharing, your performance, I felt it. I mean, not just because I identify with what you are doing. There are many things wrapped up in that. We know each other, so I care about you guys; we spent time together. But also, the way you are moving has a different quality because of the feeling of it. There is a certain

vibration from different body systems that's tangible, but also just the way that you go into it is a different way of performing, and it has a different effect.

I like to use my body, to have some scores, material, things that I work with. I have an idea within my body, and that creates by-products that give a certain attention and a certain feeling. There is something direct about it. Then I can be direct with the audience, too.

G: *When you perform, what kind of feedback from the audience is calling you?*

O: I am interested in following attention. The project I am working on now is called *Lineage*. I have a lineage of dance. I describe my work as dance because those who came before me are dancers. I follow Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, and they come from dance. With *Lineage*, I think about drawing a single line—you cannot pick up your pen from the paper. I am interested in continuing to move through something. I have received feedback that the people are totally following what I am doing the whole time. I mostly try to learn how, when I am by myself in a solo, to maintain continuity and engagement without self-judgment.

G: *Coming back to your class, I am thinking that sometimes my body feels what's going on before we start the exercise. The way you show pictures of the anatomy, how you move with it; it's clear that you know the way to experience it, you've embodied it, and part of the transmission is already done.*



photo © Sean Smuda

Weekly CI class with Olive Bieringa [front] at the Cowles Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2015.



photo © Sean Smuda

BodyCartography performance during Hydropolis Boat Tour with Public Art St. Paul on the Mississippi River, St. Paul, MN, 2013.

O: This is also something very common between BMC and CI. We are very direct, and we explore. You can be direct and precise and explore at the same time. It does not have to be like an answer; we start from a point. And also this way of transmitting has a lot to do with performance. You teach and you convey—with gestures—while looking at each other. Communication has embodiment all the time; BMC has really developed that part of it.

In the last year, I've been to five workshops with Bonnie. Her main way of teaching is demonstration based. Sometimes I like to demonstrate. For my work as a choreographer, I also think it is interesting if I don't show but see what happens. Most of the time in this workshop I am demonstrating, but sometimes, like the first exercise when we worked with each other's bones, at a certain point you are not following the image of me but following the experience of working with another

partner. I like to propose things that you don't have an image of what it is but just go into. These are different ways of learning, and they take different amounts of time.

G: *This exercise was especially strong for me because the instructions were short but many ideas came to my mind afterwards.*

O: I like to give instructions at the beginning so everyone is on the same page. And then say it again, somatically. Somatization is a form where you talk and embody something at the same time. In that way, you are talking to the person's nervous system and also to their embodiment in various tissues.

G: *Listening to you reminds me of your teaching that we have two pelvic halves, one for each leg, and four joints between them; movement is there, space is present. It is not about discovering something new but just experiencing reality.*

O: You are healthy, you can move. There are people who have their pelvis glued to their spine. The point is, you want to keep experiencing movement and to make precise flows of movement. And you need to clarify how you move force through your bones, in particular your legs. Each pelvic half is actually part of your leg. The joint between your legs is your *pubic symphysis*, so that's where you should move through when you transfer your weight from foot to foot. If you transfer force from one leg to the other through your sacrum, it will stop your ability to mobilize your sacroiliac joint fully. If you habitually do that for a long time, you will start to fix connective tissues and muscles. Ultimately, this will affect your ability to perceive, because you are going to fix your spine instead of it being mobile and sensory. This will have other effects—in your breathing, for example. That's why working in this way, when you are still young and can move, it is much easier to feel limitless, without pain, and with ease. Do you want to keep that until your 70s or 80s? That's my goal.

G: *Keep on moving!* ♦

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