

Respecting Boundaries in Contact Improvisation

Contact Improvisation presents an extraordinary opportunity to discover and explore mutuality in movement. That mutuality depends on being clear about and respecting one's own and each other's boundaries.

Exploring Cooperation

Contact Improvisation is an extraordinary opportunity to explore cooperation with others and with oneself. It is organized around exploration of mutuality rather than control. Communication is never perfect, though, and sometimes people miss recognizing or honoring boundaries that they encounter. Clear guidelines can help everyone understand what to do to keep mistakes from spoiling a good situation.

Clear Communication and Connection

As with any *shared freedom*, CI cooperation depends on each of us being able to recognize and respect our own boundaries and those of others.

Cooperation depends on respecting one another's boundaries.

In order for everyone to explore in a way that serves them - pacing, depth of connection, daring, etc - we all have to be attentive for and respect the limits expressed by our partners, non-verbally and verbally.

People can offer opportunities for others to explore – sharing a dance, a change in pace or character or any aspect of the sharing – but they must not try to control the other's choice to accept or refuse those offers. Each one of us is in the best position to make our own choices.

Safety and attunement depend on this respectful sensitivity.

People cannot abide by boundaries that they do not perceive.

While exploring and expanding your frontiers, strive to be clear with yourself and with others when you reach your limits - physical, emotional, interpersonal, wherever they may be. This is crucial especially in a practice that can involve reevaluating and adjusting those boundaries.

Genuine opportunities to connect include the option to not connect.

In order for everyone to have the opportunity to make their own choices, everyone must be ready to accept being refused an invitation they offer. This applies at every aspect of partnership, up to an invitation to engage at all. Even followup to discuss a refusal must be an option which may also be refused.

As with any shared freedom, the freedom to enjoy CI depends on each of us being able to recognize and respect our own boundaries and the boundaries of others, even while - particularly while - we're reevaluating and adjusting them.

Sometimes Clarity Doesn't Come Easily

Sometimes you find effortless understanding with someone, and sometimes it doesn't come as easily. If a gesture does not successfully convey your message, you may have to explicitly speak it. Sometimes communication legitimately needs to be repeated. People may forget what you said, or understand incompletely, so you may have to

repeat yourself, at the risk of seeming harsh. Sometimes, you will be unable to get your message across and will have to remove yourself from a dance (or similarly, conversation, etc.)

What To Do When One-on-one Communication and Exiting Doesn't Work

Occasionally even the best communication is not enough. If you feel that you have been clear about your limits but they are not being honored, and you are being pursued even after removing yourself and asking to be left alone, seek mediation. Request consultation from jam organizers, workshop teachers, or anyone you trust, asking them to help convey to the other person to leave you alone. Everyone should do their best to communicate clearly and reasonably, and avoid unnecessary condemnation.

Though they should know better, it's possible that a teacher or facilitator is the one refusing to disengage. If there is no one that you trust available for consultation and mediation, your only option may be to exit an unsafe situation. Once you have left, you can find another facilitator to help you address the issue.

Fundamentally...

Contact improv is organized at its core around mutuality, not control. To work well it depends on participants respecting each other's boundaries.

For more:

- Consent is the fundamental material, the substance of mutual cooperation. Many groups in many places are striving to more fully realize this kind of cooperation. In CI, many jams have developed and shared guidelines aimed at fostering healthy engagement in their group, based on this notion. You can find a substantial compendium of these guidelines here:
 - [A Compendium of Contact Improvisation Jam Guidelines and related material from around the world](#) (maintained by Benjamin Pierce with contributions from many)
- Brooks Yardley unequivocally surfaces and addresses questions of inappropriate sexuality in the public improv space, in [Respecting Sexual Boundaries in Contact Improvisation](#) and a zine PDF linked in that article, [Respecting Boundaries/Coexisting Genders: Women's Experiences of Feeling Unsafe in Contact Improv](#). Awareness is necessary in order to preserve the opportunity to practice contact improv for the sake of contact improv - precious opportunities in adult life for play for the sake of play, not thwarted by other agendas.

Early Comments

peace making --anonymous, Fri, 30 Oct 2009 22:29:56 -0500

I would suggest that 'jam organizers, workshop teachers, or anyone you trust' reasonably attempt to mediate clear and safe communication between the concerned parties, that they may come to understanding, and foster the equanimity of the jam.

Re: peace making --Ken Manheimer, Sun, 31 Oct 2009

While often desirable, it is not always practical for "coming to understanding" to be a goal here, and in some cases, it's not appropriate or constructive. Sometimes the person feeling imposed upon has already been pressed beyond their limits, because the other person is seeking to process about the incident beyond what is welcome. The person feeling imposed upon often deserves the option to just disengage.

In some moments, the best that can happen is separate coexistence: "Genuine opportunities to connect include the option to not connect."