



BRENNAN ROY

Interview Date: May 30, 2022

Image Description: Text reads “The Remote Access Archive” atop a screenshot of a Zoom shared screen, which shows a work of art by Yo-Yo Lin. The art is a white and grey blob on a black background. The bottom shows a series of grey buttons, along with an orange chat button that is lit up. A speech bubble above it “From Dominika to everyone” says “yes same issue with audio.”

KEYWORDS

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remote
socializing,
trauma-informed,
video chat,
wheelchair
accessible, Zoom

IDENTITIES GIVEN

younger white
settler of Acadian
descent,
she/they/he
pronouns

LOCATION

Canada

Introductions

Kelsie Acton:

Okay, so if you feel comfy, like I said we can always cut this out, but could you tell me who you are and where you currently, in a broad sense, call home?

Brennan Roy:

Yeah, my name is Brennan Roy. I use they/she/he pronouns. Right now I'm in Tkaronto, colonially known as Toronto. I'm a younger white settler of Acadian descent sitting in a computer chair wearing purple headphones. I have a scruffy brown mullet, purple glasses, and I'm wearing a gray shirt. You can't see all the words on the shirt, but it says dance with me. My manual wheelchair is in the background, along with a bit of a messy bedroom.

Kelsie Acton:

Very cool. And I'm Kelsie, conducting this oral history interview. I'm a white woman with long brown hair and gold glasses and a red shawl wrapped around myself. I'm sat in my – I think this shade is called magnolia yellow, but it's a really horrific color that a lot of terrible rental places in London are painted. I'm in my bedroom, which is all this magnolia yellow.

So we'll start. Tell me about the type of remote participation you wanted to talk about today.

Contact Dance: Basics and trauma-informed practice

Brennan Roy:

I've been wanting to talk a lot about how remote participation has really expanded my world of contact dance. I'm a contact dancer as one of the things I do. I'm also a circus artist and disability consultant. But contact dance has been one of the things that has really shifted with remote

participation and disabled folks have had a really interesting time with it. And there has been a lot of vocal grief among non-disabled folks about the lack of touch. And I find that difference is really interesting. Distance and remote participation have really opened up a lot of personal exploration and possibility for me, whereas I find a lot of other folks are really rushing to get back in-person. Even though there's still an active pandemic going on as we speak and we're now in May 2022 and folks are very urgently going back when they're still so much that can be explored in the online medium, especially for movement practices.

Kelsie Acton:

So just for folks hopefully watching this interview hundreds of years from now – I like to fantasize about that – can you tell folks a little bit more about what contact dance is?

Brennan Roy:

Contact dance is a form of dance that works on energy and often touch between one, two, or more dancers. And it is often in the form of contact jams or scores. And a jam is where dancers get together in a space, virtual or in-person, and prompts may or may not be given around a method of dancing. And dancers move from one dance partner to another and have a dance experience that often involves touch but doesn't need to.

And then a score is when you're given a number of prompts that are choreographic in nature and explore within them. Often again using touch, but you don't have to.

So that's where I've landed with contact dance. And as a disabled person, especially someone who has a history of trauma and who's also neurodivergent, it's very hard for me, especially in jam spaces, to dance with people I don't know and where I don't know their history of possibly ever having touched a disabled person like me before. I continually give credit to Kathleen Rea who has done a lot of work towards creating guidelines that make safety and explicitly putting verbal consent into touch. Encouraging people to ask; can I touch you? How would be a good way to

touch you? Because until she started doing that, that actually wasn't an open part of the practice. So it's made it much more trauma-informed and accessible for folks like me to participate. The field owes her a lot of credit for those guidelines.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah. Do you wanna say just a little bit about who Kathleen is? And maybe a little bit more about actually how – because we're two dance people talking to each other – but actually how big a shift that was in contact dance.

Brennan Roy:

Kathleen is another dancer here in Toronto, who used to dance for The National Ballet. She was a ballet dancer as part of all of her amazing history. And is now one of the – I feel like one of the parents of contact dance in Toronto.

And when she put out [this guideline](#), I forget how exactly she did it, but it was published broadly and there was massive pushback. People were like, you're going to be ruining the practice, this isn't how we do this. And she got quite a lot of flak from some people who are big in the practice from what I understand. And then she also got quiet encouragement from marginalized folks being like, thank you, this is what I need. And so it's that kind of shift that has continually pushed the field forward. And now I'm so glad that her guidelines are available on her website, but now they finally say, if this has helped you, please donate to Kathleen. Because so many people were just using them without credit to her, and I feel like she deserves that credit because she puts forward so much good work.

[update, Dec 2023: sadly the pushback towards consent culture directed at Kathleen and her team became so severe that in Oct 2023 [she announced ending public serving events](#). There are now no regularly scheduled wheelchair accessible contact dance spaces left in Toronto and I am heartbroken].

Trust and touch

Kelsie Acton:

So tell me a little bit more about – you mentioned not being able to trust people in contact space and Kathleen had helped a little bit with that. Can you say more on that?

Brennan Roy:

When I started contact dance in 2018, I met Kathleen through the [Porch View Dances project](#) with Kaeja d'Dance. I got into the contact dance realm through that choreographic process. Then she invited me to her 'everybody can dance' jam which was specifically designed for and led by disabled folks. At the start of this jam during the opening circle, there was space to discuss things that were specific to your body and really discover what you needed and voice your needs. There was space for every person to take the time to voice their needs. And that was really empowering to me. Because I don't think I knew my needs for dancing with myself or others before I got into that space and it really gave me a lot of opportunity to learn and explore those needs. I didn't know them well, because my instances of touch before that were often violent instances of unwanted help in the community. So I was very apprehensive of letting other people touch me at all, let alone explore creative movement possibilities with me. I didn't know what would happen in that space. I was, and still am, very afraid of tipping backwards in my wheelchair. I had also previously had people, mostly strangers, take the back of my chair and move me without my consent.

Kelsie Acton:

Yikes.

Brennan Roy:

So that's a very active fear I know amongst myself and other wheelchair users going into spaces where people can just touch you. And so I had a huge apprehension to letting that happen. And even now it's still there. The

energetic undertaking to enter a contact jam space feels huge; emotionally, mentally, physically, and so much more; it's hard to put into words.

Recently, I went into an in-person jam that was – it was pretty COVID safe, Kathleen was running it. Everyone had to do a rapid test when they came in. And the jam wasn't disability specific. And it felt like the first time, in a non disability specific jam, that I had the skills to actually be like, okay, let's take a moment to talk about my needs as a disabled dancer and what we can do together within those parameters. I only danced with people I knew, because that's something I do. And because they were contact dancers who had experience with contact dance terminology, I could say, yes my whole body is a rolling point of contact, we have to have a communication about that and share weight intentionally with movement in mind. And yes, you have consent to move me this way, or that way, or let's go quickly across the whole dance floor. And we had some really good dances and it was kind of a transformative experience, getting to trust non-disabled people in certain spaces with that open dialogue. It was really weird.

Remote access as generative boundary

Kelsie Acton:

It sounds beautiful. So tell me what happened when everything went online with the pandemic.

Brennan Roy:

There was a lot of panic. And also, with contact dance I was like, oh this is an opportunity. What can we do? Because moving online did take away that fear of, oh my god someone's gonna touch me without consent. At that time, I still was very much in the fear of non-consensual touch and feeling like I had to give all of this explanation of, if you touch me here, we could – if you put this much weight in this area we're going to tip over backwards. And a lot of that explanation came because I didn't feel like I had the skill myself as a dancer to be able to recover safely if someone didn't respect or understand my needs and there was an accident. I noticed that I didn't have those skills because I didn't have anywhere to explore it in a way that

felt as safe as possible, without having to manage that fear of unwanted touch along with navigating the movement exploration itself. When everything went online and I had a very solid boundary of - nobody can touch me through the screen in this space. I felt like I was much more able to discover and explore my body, my needs, and my limits by myself with the contact dance prompts that were given.

I distinctly remember I went to a furniture dance class at one contact dance conference, which I wouldn't have been able to go to because it was very remote, at a non-physically-accessible location that I would have had to get a travel grant to go to if it was in-person. And I was able to just go to my living room and go to this class. And most of the non-disabled people were having a difficult time relating to their couches or chairs or whatever they were dancing with. And to me, it was the opposite. It was as if it was exactly what I had been waiting for. And it was beautiful to get to really explore those tipping points and get to know my device in a more intimate way without that underlying fear of like, oh, if I tip over, somebody is going to rush in and touch me and I'm going to have to immediately defend that boundary. Or instruct how to help me and get into what feels like a distinctive mode to avoid a traumatic conflict that I don't want to get into in the dance space. So having a firm zoom box that is mine, where nobody else is gonna be in there unless I invite them into my home, was really amazing. If I fell over, others were responsible for their reactions and managing their emotions. In contrast, I feel like I can't make mistakes in public spaces. If I fall on the street, cars will stop and people will rush out to help, even if I'm telling them not to. So in this zoom room, it was really important to me that the entirety of others' reactions - physical, verbal, emotional, etc. - stayed in their own space and didn't cross over into mine. If they're concerned, they can decide to chat me if they want and I can get to it when I'm ready.

Kelsie Acton:

It's so fascinating because in many ways what I think what you're saying is that becoming remote removed a whole lot of the labor of managing non-disabled people's feelings and perceptions around disability.

Brennan Roy:

Exactly. I want to do that labor only when I consent to it, and I don't always want to have to do it when I am exploring my body in dance space. I don't get a lot of opportunities to do that exploration. And it's just a lot to manage emotionally myself and adds to my mental load. Removing this labor helps to avoid becoming overstimulated, which helps improve my overall movement capacity and experience

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah, so I'm really interested in this bit where you also talk about how you were suddenly able to – you can tell me if these words for this are wrong – develop more of a sense of your body and your tool and your technique. Can you tell me more about that?

Brennan Roy:

Yeah. Both moving online and having open conversations about needs and consensual touch gave me a lot more space to do that. And to have self-exploration of my body. So much more space for exploration and agency, especially as a disabled person.

And then I'm in another film process right now with Kathleen, Steff Juniper, and Luke Anderson. Luke and I are the dancers in this contact dance based film called Contact ZoomProv, which is the cutest name ever. I love it. We have been really exploring what disability contact through an online space looks like. It's so fun and healing.

There have been moments where I'm really feeling into my body in ways that I don't feel like I've had the opportunity to do in spaces that are not my home. Because I have had to manage so much to just get to the physical space. Then often, all of the things in the space are causing me too much distraction or outright distress to really get to that connected place with my body so I'm able to dance. It's really beautiful to have a facilitated process of contact dance where I can have that depth of connection with myself and another person and we don't even have to touch each other.

Relationship between dancers over zoom

Kelsie Acton:

Tell me more because – I think of contact improvisation as fundamentally about relationships. You've done far more contact than I have, so you're welcome to correct me, but can you talk to what that relationship to other people is like over zoom and in remote spaces?

Brennan Roy:

Yeah, you're so right. The relationship element is huge. And it's relationship and energy, I find are big. So over Zoom – I find it's also hard – I'm a low vision person, so I'm trying to find ways to do it also without relying on vision. One of the ways that we've done this that has been really cool has been taking turns with one person dancing and the other person witnessing while spontaneously describing the dance, then switching roles. Or the give and take score has been really good.

Kelsie Acton:

Tell me about that, I don't think I know that score.

Brennan Roy:

I don't know if I'm labeling it right, but while one person is dancing the other person witnesses, whether visually or with other senses. And then it trades off.

Kelsie Acton:

Okay, cool. Yeah, yeah. So, I think of that as out of authentic movement practices, but it's probably – living in contact is – sorry I'm exhausted, I'm gonna shut up and let you talk instead of nerding out about dance. Please go on.

Brennan Roy:

I love it. I love this conversation. We can be exhausted together. I'm also exhausted, I was in the woods.

Kelsie Acton:

Yes, yes, you were.

Brennan Roy:

Yeah, where we lost power and water.

Kelsie Acton:

Oh my god, okay.

Brennan Roy:

The show went on.

Kelsie Acton:

As it does.

Brennan Roy:

As it does. What was I saying?

Kelsie Acton:

Sorry, you're talking about give and take scores, so relationships can be through witnessing in Zoom. And then I think I derailed us, so thinking about the ways that we establish relationship in remote spaces.

Brennan Roy:

We had also worked with breath and sound and mood. If we were both connected over an emotion that day, we would dance about that emotion. There was one day we had met and Luke and I were both really feeling heavy in our grief. So I was like, do you wanna just have a dance party? And let's vibe on each other's dance energy and hype it up. And so we exchanged hype-y kinda club dance movements together. And to me, that's contact. It doesn't have to be as, I don't know, strict as some people think it

is. It was a beautiful energy exchange. We built up a relationship. We were connected. And we had a beautiful dance together.

Kelsie Acton:

This sounds amazing.

Brennan Roy:

Yeah.

Navigating risk in 2022

Kelsie Acton:

So talk to me about now. You said at the start of this interview that there's a lot of vocal grief about loss of contact and now we're very intensely back into contact. What are things like for you now in the dance world?

Brennan Roy:

It feels a little contentious, I think is the best word. I feel like I'm navigating risk in an interesting way. Touch still feels risky. I'm immunocompromised so I am taking a lot of care with which experiences I choose to go to and what covid protocols are in place and how much touch I engage in. Even though I would love to be in a large group dance again compressed with many dancers. It would feel wonderful. And. It doesn't feel safe. I think to pre-pandemic times when there were almost a hundred people in a tiny room doing contact dance together and getting really really close. That level of closeness and lack of ventilation gives me a lot of anxiety. I don't think I could be comfortable with that again. And so I think that having online experiences are still entirely necessary, especially with how much depth they can offer. Yeah.

Kelsie Acton:

Yeah.

Brennan Roy:

Especially with the dropping of all of the rules for – now that it's not mandatory to show vaccines, now that it's not necessarily mandatory to wear masks or have all of these things, a lot of people are just not doing it. And so it doesn't necessarily feel very safe to go to everything. So I'm making decisions based on that. And a lot of the places who are making space for me are making conscious decisions about that and I am really appreciative about that. There's also still some places where I need to go because I need to eat, or work, so I have to take that risk. I can't afford to deliver all of my groceries, so I'm gonna go to the food bank and take that risk. My social assistance does not cover all my expenses. That's just a reality of my life amid late stage capitalism and I know I am not alone. I protect myself as best I can amidst these risks and constant conflicts.

Kelsie Acton:

Is there still dance happening online that you can engage with?

Brennan Roy:

There's some, yeah. I don't know how much of it is contact, but there are some classes that are still online that I can attend. My rehearsal process is still online. We had intended for that to stay online the entire time, because our entire team needed an online process, both during rehearsal and presentation of the film.

Kelsie Acton:

Very cool.

Brennan Roy:

Agreed. It's so cool how remote participation allows us to be connected wherever and however people need to meet.

Disabled/Non-disabled

Kelsie Acton:

It's very cool. And do you feel like all those skills that you've talked about gaining and that body awareness, has it transferred out of zoom space and into live space?

Brennan Roy:

Absolutely. I'm able to be more present in navigating when I'm with groups of, I would say not visibly disabled people, because I feel like it's really hard to know when folks are disabled non-disabled, or identifying as chronically ill, neurodivergent, mad, etc...

So like when I was camping, for example, it was not a very accessible space. But instead of being really grumpy about it or not going to the event, I advocated for my needs. Something that would work so that I could still participate and make art in the space. I was also able to have some ridiculous adventures with the support of the other circus folks who were there. However, a lot of those solutions required the physical support of other humans.

And I don't think I would have done that pre-pandemic because I was really stuck in the, oh my god don't touch me, you're gonna hurt me, I'm gonna tip over if you do this, I don't know my tipping point. All of these very real fears. And I probably wouldn't have let a rotating team of five people push me on a ridiculous hike full of rocky trails.

Kelsie Acton:

That sounds really amazing.

Brennan Roy:

It was fun. It was definitely it's own – I don't know if it was a contact experience or a circus experience, but it was something ridiculous. And I also felt very safe because I was able to communicate what I needed the whole time and felt heard and understood by those supporting me.

Kelsie Acton:

Amazing. Do you notice differences between your disabled and non-disabled communities in terms of how remote access is used?

Brennan Roy:

I think that there's not as much commitment to remote access in the dance and circus world. There's still not a lot of – in the disability dance niche there *is* commitment to online access. So I don't wanna discount that. But in the contact world and the circus world it's much more difficult to find consistent online access opportunities. There's some folks doing hybrid. Like the presentation of the show that I'm doing now with Kathleen will be a hybrid showing. There will be one pre-recorded film (our film, Contact ZoomProv), the three other people who are performing are doing live performances, with the audience having the option to attend either online or in person. So that's been interesting. And it was really cool to negotiate a contract in an accessible way. I've never done that before. So it's cool to know that there are people who are open to that.

I was recently with Kaeja d'Dance; their "Moving Connections" program was also an online program. It was open to all folks, so it wasn't disability specific, it was integrated. But it was online as well and it was good times.

Kelsie Acton:

Is there anything else you'd really like the universe or people 200 years from now to know about remote access right now or in the future?

Brennan Roy:

Let me look through my notes. There's this one note that I also wanted to talk about. This was never a formed thought and it's still not a formed thought. That having the opportunity to explore your body in that way where you don't have touch coming at you is, I feel, really important for folks who are disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent, mad, etc... Particularly because we haven't had so many of those opportunities. Historically, there has been a lot of medical intervention where you don't get a lot of control around how you're touched. This is true for folks who are congenitally disabled, have acquired disabilities, later recognized conditions, and any

combination thereof. It's even very difficult to have any kind of agency within the medical system and this extends out into other areas of life – Even in consent situations that may seem simple, agency is often denied to folks who are disabled, chronically ill, mad, neurodiverse, etc. I remember recently advocating for myself not to have to change into a gown in the change room, and instead asking to change in the procedure room, or not to use a gown at all. This was to avoid an extra transfer into an inaccessible change room prior to an echocardiogram. This caused a lot of friction with the receptionist and nursing team, who didn't understand why I wasn't willing or able to do the additional transfer. Eventually the doctor came into the procedure room and was like, oh yeah that's fine, we can just have you drape the gown in the room. But the friction leading up to that point was invalidating and distressing. It could also be dangerous for someone who wasn't white. These kinds of interventions, touch, and invalidations of our consent are really common with disabled, chronically ill, neurodiverse, and mad folks all throughout our lives.

And it's so important to have opportunities and spaces to explore our bodies without it before integrating touch. So we know our boundaries, needs, wants, and know what the body is like.

Especially because the body isn't just like the physical body. a person who uses mobility devices or other assistive technology, it's a body that incorporates technology. How that technology works with one's physical body and mind is an important relationship to learn to develop before dancing with another person. To me, it's important to know that internal personal relationship so I can communicate needs, wants, and boundaries for an exploration in a space and with another person. I also think knowing more about oneself and the bodymind/technology relationship can be really helpful for noticing and working with trauma responses - with folks in the disability, neurodivergent, chronically ill, mad, etc communities, and with non-disabled folks as well.

And I don't say this lightly. This isn't easy. I think there's a lot of stuff that's rooted into institutionalization of disabled people that influences reactions

to the presence of folks who appear to be or actively identify as disabled, neurodivergent, mad, chronically ill, etc. It feels as though these identities, our bodies/minds/technology, and our needs are not expected in public space.

These reactions and the escalations that ensue from them are something I am constantly trying to unpack. Some of that unpacking ability I can credit directly to having remote exploration spaces to know my body and explore how current and historical systems of oppression impact my body/mind/technology and my movement practice. These spaces also support how I navigate the impacts of that oppression in everyday dance interactions through the lens of consent.

I feel it's really important to have a space with consent, access, and remote participation options to do those kinds of body/mind/technology explorations. And however that looks might be very, very different depending on the person. Whether it's through dance, kink, art, pottery, whatever that is for them... I hope folks reading this understand the importance of continuing to facilitate these important online spaces. I am incredibly thankful for all those who offered me online space for my learning thus far.

Kelsie Acton

Amazing. Are there other things you want to say?

Brennan Roy

I don't know. I think that's okay for now.