EMPIRICAL STUDY / ANALYSIS

Distance, Closeness and Touch in and as an Improvised Duet Dance: How to "Move a Bit Further Away" with a Partner

Alain Bovet[1]

Abstract
The intelligibility of a performance of improvised dance does not reside in the rehearsed execution of a pre-existing script, nor does it result from a sustained verbal interaction between the dancers. Many aspects of the speechless performance obviously play an important role in the achieved intelligibility of the dance: a dancer is seen moving on and from a ground, on a stage, in a space delimited by walls, illuminated by spotlights, sounded by music, in front of an audience. And of course with other dancers, whose joint gestures and moves give shape to a choreography by providing pace, rhythm and sequences, thereby constituting a narrative or fragments thereof. This paper addresses the manufacture of this witnessable order, by presenting some results of an ethnographic inquiry. The investigation will be focused on how, in an improvised duet, each dancer interacts with the other, and more specifically how she or he positions her- or himself in relation to the other, from distance to proximity and touch. This work of distance management is the dance, whose choreographic accountability is produced and structured by dancers staying at a distance, getting closer and touching each other. The analysis shows that distance management is oriented to as relevant by the dancers and that it has consequences on their improvised duet. It is also what makes their performance analyzable by distant observers.

Keywords Dance · Improvisation · Ethnomethodology · Phenomenology · Touch · Interaction

> *"Dance is a way to always move a bit further away. That's where its only country is." Giacomo, dancer, after an Italian poet.*

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Attending a collectively improvised dance performance is a singular experience. While it might be difficult to put it in words, something is definitely to be seen, heard, felt and understood in what is being assembled by the moves of the dancers. And the fact that, at some points, certain specific moves may appear insufficiently articulated with the unfolding choreography testifies to the fact that something otherwise is being intelligibly assembled.

The witnessable order (Macbeth, 1999) of the performance does not reside in the rehearsed execution of a pre-existing script, nor does it result from a sustained verbal interaction between the dancers. While dancers may sometimes utter or write words, they stay quite far from a verbal exchange (such as in a theatre play).

Many aspects of the speechless performance obviously play an important role in the achieved intelligibility of the assemblage: a dancer is seen moving on and from a ground, on a stage, in a space delimited by walls, illuminated by spotlights, sounded by musicians (also improvising and co-present on the stage), occupied by objects, in front of an audience. And of course with other dancers, whose joint gestures and moves give shape to a choreography by providing pace, rhythm and sequences, thereby constituting a narrative or fragments thereof.

In this paper, I want to address the manufacture of this witnessable order, by presenting some results of an ethnographic inquiry. I will focus my investigation on how, in an improvised duet, each dancer interacts with the other, and more specifically how she or he positions her- or himself in relation to the other, from distance to proximity and touch. This work of distance management is not to be reduced to a practical and embodied aspect of the choreography; it is the dance, whose choreographic accountability is produced and structured by dancers staying at a distance, getting closer and touching each other. The analysis shows that distance management is oriented to as relevant by the dancers and that it has consequences on their improvised duet. It is also what makes their performance analyzable by distant observers.[1]

Improvised Dance as Embodied Interaction

Improvised Dance

This text aims at a detailed empirical analysis of sequences of improvised dance. Himberg et al. (2018)'s neuro-scientific approach to collective improvised dance rightly emphasizes the "kinaesthetics of togetherness": "moving together is not merely a by-product of the activity, but can be its very aim" (2018: 2). To address this specific form of collective agency, Himberg et al. set up measurable and quantifiable dancing tasks such as mirror games and rhythm battles. What gets lost in the process is the endogenous unfolding of actual stretches of dance, documenting how dancers "make do with what is at hands" to proceed with their dance. A similar

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limitation can be observed in the dance studies literature (Brandstaetter et al., 2013; Sarko-Thomas, 2019), which, while highly inspiring, rarely and only superficially addresses improvised dance practices in their indexical details. While I will resort to enlightening formulations from these two sources, my take on improvised dance will be more praxiological and naturalistic.

Some praxiological studies have been devoted to "social dances," such as Lindy Hop (Albert, 2015; Broth & Keevallik, 2014; Keevallik, 2010, 2015, 2021). "Social dance" refers to an institutionalized practice, that can be more or less formally taught and learned, such as salsa, tango or Lindy Hop. As instructed actions, they do require and involve improvisation (see Albert, 2015), but always with reference to an institutionalized practice that prescribes and constrains the types of movement, coordination and rhythmic adjustment.

Improvised dance, in its Western form, developed throughout the twentieth century in reaction to the constraints of social dance (Couderc, 2009). Simone Forti, one of its main instigators, considered that a prescriptive choreography, and the technical challenges its performance raises, causes the dancers to give up all sorts of opportunities that appear in and through their bodily involvement (Couderc, 2009: 99). Since some degrees of improvisation are to be found even in the most pre-scripted and prescriptive choreography, the specificity of improvised dance lies not in improvisation per se, but rather in the endogenous nature of the composition of the choreography that has to be discovered and invented in and through the engagement of the dancers in the dance. This could not be clearer than in the name of "instant composition" that was adopted by an important tradition of improvised dance (Couderc, 2009). Thus, the study of improvised dance raises quite different empirical and epistemological questions than those addressed in studies of "social dance," understandably more oriented towards instructed action.

More relevant developments can be found in the phenomenological philosophy of dance that Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has produced (1979, 2011, 2015), especially the enlightening pages she devotes to dance improvisation, subtitled "a paradigm of thinking in movement" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011: 420–430). Here's how she phrased the "rules, as it were, of dance improvisation […]: dance the dance as it comes into being at this particular moment at this particular place. […] Whatever the framing rules might be that act as a constraint upon movement, the aim of the dancers is to form movement spontaneously. It is to dance *this evening's dance*, whatever it might turn out to be" (2011: 420).

The emphasis on the indexical production implies that "in a dance improvisation, the process of creating is not the means of realizing a dance; it is *the* dance itself" (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011: 421). Being caught in an "ongoing flow of movement from an ever-changing kinetic world of possibilities" (2011: 421), the dancer cannot but *think in movement*: "To say that the dancer is thinking in movement does not mean that the dancer is thinking *by means* of movement or that her/his thoughts are *being transcribed into* movement. To think is first of all to be caught up in a dynamic flow; thinking is itself, by its very nature, kinetic. It moves forward, backward, digressively, quickly, slowly, narrowly, suddenly, hesitantly, blindly, confusedly, penetratingly. What is distinctive about thinking in movement is not that the flow of thought

is kinetic, but that the thought itself is. It is motional through and through; at once spatial, temporal, dynamic" (2011: 421).

Far from the bodily expression of a verbal meaning, dance improvisation defines its meaning "not […] in terms of an externally imposed scheme of some kind but in terms of a *kinetic bodily logos*, a body that, in thinking in movement, grasps the global qualitative dynamics in which it is enmeshed" (2011: 424). The *kinetic bodily logos* refers to the embodied capability of both perceiving the ongoing situation and kinetically acting in it and upon it. As such, it is not a dancer's privilege, though experience in improvised dancing certainly enhances it.

While Sheets-Johnstone's formulations of the phenomenon proves extremely enlightening, her methodological adherence to first-person individual accounts prevents detailed analysis of stretches of actual improvised dance. My own analyses will thus be informed and inspired by ethnomethodological and conversation analysis studies on interaction and coordination, especially those that concentrate on embodied and visual aspects rather than on the organization of talk. I will start with how ethnomethodological studies help to delineate and understand what improvisation consists of. From there I will look into the substance of improvised dance, i.e., moves, postures and gestures. These embodied resources allow the dancers to take a position, quite literally by positioning the body, more or less close to the partner's body, and more figuratively as a means to "move a bit further away" in the unfolding choreography.

Improvisation

Harold Garfinkel's studies in ethnomethodology (1967) opened up a field of empirical research devoted to the largely improvised practical ways through which we go about our daily business. Garfinkel initially insisted on the *etcetera* clause and *ad hocing* practices that help us accommodate, here, now and with no time out, the irreducible indexicality of practical situations. While not explicitly focused on improvisation, Garfinkel's later writings (2002) kept exploring situated uses of practical reasoning; instructed action, for instance, requires to discover, in the unfolding course of following an instruction, what this (unavoidably incomplete) instruction actually means and implies in the case at hand. This cannot be done theoretically or in imagination, since material and embodied dimensions are constitutive of the instructed action. In other words, it is only by engaging in the practice that one can have access to the relevant aspects through which this practice can be understood and accomplished.

In her influential account of situated action, Lucy Suchman (1987) developed Garfinkel's perspective. She showed that however precise and explicit a plan might be, its execution unavoidably requires much improvisation, for instance in the form of a myriad of decisions that have to be made on the spot, based as much on emergent indexical properties of the situation, on commonsense knowledge of social structures and on situated understanding of the plan. Suchman and Garfinkel help us understand that improvisation should not be construed, negatively, as action lacking

a plan, a script, a score or a text. Instructed or not, an ordered action can only be achieved through improvisation.

Let's now move a step further and turn to studies that not only accounted for the unavoidably improvised dimension of human action, but that addressed improvisation per se, as an artistic endeavor, where improvisation is not the *modus operandi* to carry out other activities but the *opus operatum*, an end in itself (Schubert, 2019).

David Sudnow (2001) provided an unprecedented first-person description of learning to play improvised jazz piano. Sudnow explains how years of trained and self-taught practice gradually brought him to play the right note at the right time. Rather than a post-hoc theorizing of improvisation, Sudnow's "production account" describes how his hands gradually found their ways in and through the keyboard, until he was able to "sing *with* [his] fingers" (2001: 7). What was at stake was not to play according to formal rules, but to recover, discover and produce the specific jazz quality of the "jazz on the records," "this jazz music [that] *is*, first and foremost, particular ways of moving from place to place" (2001: 127). That Sudnow eventually devised and seld a method for learning to play improvised piano shows, again, the limitations of romantic or patronizing views of improvisation, that reduce it to an idiosyncratic or irrational endeavor.

John Bowers (2002) provided an articulate description of his own engagement in improvised electro-accoustic music. While adding the collective dimension that is not addressed in Sudnow's book, Bowers also insisted on the specific role of technical, social or other contingencies. Not only do these contingencies emphasize the necessity of improvisation, they also constrain the practitioners to devise and discover new ways of dealing with them *in, of and as* the unfolding music. In other words, they cannot stop the music to verbally or otherwise accommodate an emergent contingency; they have to address it *musically*, the music thus produced being then a public display of its production circumstances. The same can be said of improvising dancers who are expected to find and perform the choreography on the spot and with what is at hand, with no possibility of verbal correction, explanation or time out. What they have at hand is first and foremost their own and their partner's body, and their interaction. In order to better understand this speechless coordination, I will now turn to studies of embodied interaction.

Embodied Interaction

While Sacks and Schegloff constituted the phenomenon of talk-in-interaction as a specific empirical analytic endeavor, namely conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992), a number of studies, inspired by Goffman's and Kendon's pioneering work (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1981; Kendon, 1978, 1990) and starting with Sack's and Schegloff's own research on the subject (Sacks & Schegloff, 2002; Schegloff, 1998) put an increasing emphasis on visual and embodied aspects of interaction. Sudnow's early work on interpersonal observation (Sudnow, 1972) showed that, with or without talk, human actions display a visual organization, with specific temporality and sequentiality and hence projectability (Relieu, 1999). Goodwin (1981) and later Streeck (2009, 2017) systematically exploited video data to document how gaze, bodily movements and postures are

entangled with talk to produce the accountability of interactions, their scenic intelligibility (Jayyusi, 1988) that provides for a "witnessable order" (Macbeth, 1999). Heath's studies of medical practice and other workplaces (Heath, 1986; Heath & Luff, 2000) emphasized what the endogenous ordering of specific work situation owes to gestures and gaze, as well as the manipulation of objects and technologies. These pioneering studies gave birth to a burgeoning field of interaction studies (see Streeck, Goodwin, & Lebaron, 2011, Deppermann & Streeck, 2018), characterized by a multimodal approach whose systematic use of video recordings attempts to save the experiential richness of the phenomena (Quéré, 2004).

The studies from this field are of great help to better understand what it takes to conduct and sustain an interaction. It should be noted though that they mostly address how speech configures, and is configured by, other aspects such as moves, gestures, gaze, objects, materiality, etc. When it comes to an almost completely speechless practice, such as dance, two remarks are in order.

First, improvised dance *lacks* neither pre-scripted choreography nor speech. The absence of speech may be remarkable in human interaction, but it does not imply that dance should be approached as the pursuit of talk through other means. I will exploit the intelligibility of the dance and its corollary of being accounted for through verbal glosses, but it is important to keep in mind that dance moves are not substitutes for words.

The second remark concerns the temporality of dance as opposed to the turn-by-turn sequentiality of talk. Much of CA work revolves around the turn-taking system for conversation. Even though it is increasingly addressed as allowing coordinated action formation rather than the mere exchange of words, it remains mostly concerned with the designing of turns and their sequential organization. While dance is fundamentally structured by temporality, it can hardly be described as a turn-taking organization. The specific problems that the turn-taking system addresses, namely that at least one and no more than one party speaks at a time, are not relevant for dance, even though some specific choreographic stretches may turn out to be organized on a turn-by-turn basis (Himberg et al., 2018). As Depperman and Streeck (2018: 19) note: "When the notion of 'turn' is abstracted from the verbal-vocal domain, fundamental principles of turn-organization do not apply anymore: it makes no sense to conceive of non-vocal bodily actions as 'inhabiting the floor,' or as 'overlapping' each other. Nor can they in many cases be segmented into discrete [turn-constructional units]".

While these two remarks alert us to differences between talk-in-interaction and dance, I will stick nevertheless to the analytic mentality of CA, where producing meaningful, temporally structured, gestures and moves, and making sense of them, is first and foremost the dancers' problem. The analysis aims at describing how *they* solve the problem, how they let each other and the audience know what is going on in the dance they are assembling. Such an endeavor was eloquently described in Macbeth's account of his practice of basketball (Macbeth, 2012: 200): "I want to provide some description of how [the identifying detail of playing ball] is produced and found from bodies-in-play, *as* the play, as the sense of being well into the game 'now,' the lived affairs for which 'playing ball' can only be, without complaint, a concealing gloss".

Distance, Closeness and Touch

Many praxiological studies have recently addressed issues of closeness and touch in interaction (Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018; Cekaite & Mondada, 2021; Routarinne, Tainio, & Burdelski, 2020). This literature respecifies the seminal studies of proxemics (Hall, 1959a, 1959b) by showing that interactants constantly manage and negotiate their engagement in the ongoing interaction as well as their relationship to each other by positioning their body or parts of it at specific distance from the other's body, from distance to closeness and direct contact. Since this literature remains focused on the articulation of talk with bodily positioning, I will focus on Lefebvre's study of Aikido (Lefebvre, 2016; this issue), which shares with dance the property of proceeding without talk. Aikido is a ritualized martial art with a high degree of cooperation. For instance, the categories of attacker and counter-attackers are established before the fight and cannot be modified or switched. Yet, a lot of other aspects remain open and thus require that much attention be paid to the other's bodily position and moves. Lefebvre shows the importance of what precedes the contact, where whole body movements project all sorts of opportunities for the conduct of attack and counter-attack. Phases of pre-touch and touch are decisive to the outcome of the confrontation. Significantly relying on his own Aikido expertise, Lefebvre shows that contact provides more indications to the partners than to the viewing audience, suggesting thereby that much of the coordination is obtained through invisible (or only partly and partially visible) means. Apart from this methodological question, Lefebvre revisits Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's intuitions on the ambivalent nature of touch. As inseparably and simultaneously touching and being touched, touching partners give as much as they receive from each other, calling thereby for a reconfiguration of agency, that can no longer be reduced to the active–passive or subject-object great divide role.[2] While dance, especially duets, may seem far remote from the confrontation of Aikido, we will see that both practices address similar issues of visually and tactilely detecting and exploiting in the other's body opportunities for the continuation of the interaction. Both practices appear then as perspicuous settings to empirically document Merleau-Ponty's seminal intuitions (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) on intercorporeality (Meyer, Streeck, & Jordan, 2019).

Context and Methods

This paper is a first account of an ethnographic study of an international dance company, located in French-speaking Switzerland. Members of the company are professional or experienced dancers, with a variety of training, from classical ballet dance to contemporary improvisation. They share a commitment to improvised dance, but

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[2] Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's remarks on honey (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), Shaw (2019) explores the phenomenality of touching "inanimate" matters in dance. While the agency of honey or waxwood proves considerably more complex than in the case of Descartes' wax piece, the agency of a touched human being remains distinct. See also Ruffo (2019) on the specific asymmetry of agency in Tango.

each member has her/his personal preferences (solo, duet, group, without music, with pre-recorded music, with improvised music, etc.). While they recognize their debt to Steve Paxton and Contact Improvisation Dance (see Couderc, 2009), they insist on what they have specifically learned and developed by dancing together over 15–20 years.

They explicitly reject the insistence on contact in "contact improvisation," which tends to make it a necessary if not constitutive part of the performance. As I will show, they do not "rush into contact," and even consider it not necessary, unless it organically unfolds from a specific state of the performance. In ethnomethodological terms, contact has to have an indexical relevance in the reflexive co-elaboration of the choreography. This implies that a successful performance can happen without contact (even though it rarely does). In one of the dancer's poetic terms, contact is only one of the ways to "move a bit further away," which is "dance's only country".

Data

The ethnographic inquiry is based on data collected over a 5 years period during four gatherings of the dance company. The meetings consisted of three-day workshops, where professional and/or experienced dancers trained 12–15 beginners. The day workshops were followed by public performances at night by the experienced dancers. The music was always improvised on stage by professional or experienced musicians. As a spectator interested in improvisation and friend of a company member, I attended the workshops and public performances and obtained the permission to film with a video camera. I had informal interactions with members of the company and workshop participants. I later conducted a series of data sessions and interviews with company members, all professional or experienced practitioners of improvised dance. These interviews and data sessions were focused on two video sequences of improvised duets and on the topic of closeness and touch, which appeared to be an essential aspect of the filmed duets.

This paper will focus on a three-and-a-half-minute improvised duet occurring during one of the workshops. Though there were improvising musicians on the stage, the sequence can be described as a dance duet, since two workshop participants were co-present on the stage and obviously danced together. In the analysis, I will show how they exhibit to each other and to the audience that they dance together. I will also show how their performance displays a recognizable beginning and ending.

The duet happened in a phase of "free exercises" at the end of one of the morning workshops. While there was some formal training during the morning, the trainer only gave loose instructions for the "free exercises" phase: "And now we do one group improvisation, 15 minutes, people can come out and come in as we want […] there are solos and there are duets, or trios or big groups". The actual exercises consisted in a series of duets, with brief overlaps of distinct duets being co-present on the stage. Focusing on a single duet will allow me to examine how its unfolding narrative revolves around distance management, from distance to closeness and touch.

Video analysis

My analysis will be based on a video recording of the duet, that is available in its entirety at the following link https://drive.switch.ch/index.php/s/c5IPJ3mAz3Cn8L1. I will pay attention to how each singular dancer contributes to a joint choreography. Similar in this respect to turns at talk that are both context-sensitive and context-renewing (Heritage, 1984), each dancer has to both anchor its motion in what the other does and "move a bit further away" so that the joint dance develops. Concentrating on moments when the joint dance can be seen to develop into something different, I will attempt to describe how each dancer contributes to and manages these transitions. Much of the aesthetic quality of improvised dance lies in the joint and smooth production of such transitions, which should not be, or at least not too obviously, unilaterally initiated by one of the dancers. As Himberg et al., (2018: 4) note: "as we move together, the boundaries between moving and being moved blur, and we do not know with certainty whether we initiated a movement or inserted ourselves in a pre-existing wave".

For the sake of clarity, my description will be based on stills from the video recordings. In order not to freeze inherently dynamic phenomena, the still will be precisely located, thus allowing the reader to consider it from within the developing dance as documented by the whole video sequence. Transcripts would not bring much to the analysis, not just because there is no talk but because the semiotic transformation of visible gestures and movements into textual symbols would lose much of the natural intelligibility of the phenomenon. Musical transcripts could help to address the temporality of specific moves, but they would render the analysis hardly readable to non-musicians. Moreover, I will show that the music is not treated by the dancers as a constraining rhythmic structure, but rather as an ornamental accompaniment to the choreography or, at most, as accentuating it.

While the visibility of the phenomenon is of great help for description and analysis, it should be handled with care, especially when dancers touch each other. Since it always implies touching and being touched, touch provides action and communication opportunities that are distinct and to some extent inaccessible to vision and audition. While video analysis remains a privileged resource to observe touch and its consequences on action, it is also limited in that it does not provide access to some specificities of the lived touch.

Interviews

In order to reach other aspects of the phenomenon, I will mobilize the experience and professional vision (Goodwin, 1994) of dancers through interviews extracts in the video analysis. I will draw from 2 in-depth interviews and 2 data sessions with 3 professional or experienced practitioners of improvised dance. In both interviews and data sessions, the interviewees (who were not the filmed dancers) were shown the entire sequence as well as excerpts of it, and invited to comment and react. These exchanges proved fruitful to gain a better understanding of what is involved

Fig. 1 (0′10''): Daniel takes position at the back of the stage, as Giacomo and Simon (off-camera) leave

in an improvised dance. Not only because dancers mostly enjoy talking about their practice, but also because they are concerned with establishing the distinctively embodied character of improvised dance. They thus exhibited a great sensitivity to the endogenous indexicalities of the unfolding choreography, instead of jumping to exogenous dimensions.

These ex-post verbal formulations demonstrated in the first place the basic intelligibility of the filmed sequence, in the sense of a witnessable order. No one described the filmed dance as non-sensical, meaningless or erratic. Moreover, they were able to provide enlightening comments on the invisibilities of touch, based on their extended experience of similar touching moments. Of course I will not confront my analytic observation with theirs. I will rather use theirs to complement mine, particularly with regard to touch.

Engaging in a Duet

As a focused interaction (Goffman, 1963), an improvised dance duet does not happen simply with two dancers being co-present on the stage. The participation frame has to be worked out (Goffman, 1981; Zimmerman, 1989). Each of the two dancers has to enter the stage and recognize or ratify the other dancer as his/her duet partner. The duet that I will analyze starts while two dancers, Giacomo and Simon, who self-selected when the trainer launched the "free exercise" phase are already on stage, producing a duet. Then Daniel, a third dancer, enters stage left, and walks along the back of the stage to the right.[3] By entering the stage, from the benches in front of the stage where workshop participants are seated, Daniel self-selects as new dancer on stage. He passes between Giacomo and Simon, who quickly leave the stage, without engaging in a focused interaction with the newcomer (Fig. 1). Daniel remains at the back of the stage with small arms and legs gestures, suggesting that he is letting

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[3] Left, right, front and back are meant from the perspective of the audience, where the camera was located.

Fig. 2 (0′13''): Ana bends her trajectory towards Daniel

Fig. 3 (0′19''): Ana and Daniel come to a standstill in front of each other

them go and positioning himself as the dancer for the next part of the dance. The absence of focused interaction suggests that the co-presence on stage of Daniel on one side and Giacomo and Simon on the other is a matter of overlap between two performances rather than the start of a trio.

The transition between the two duets would deserve a specific analysis, based on a collection of cases, to clarify what has to do with their duet accountably coming to a closure, and thus prompting Daniel to self-select and/or with Daniel's entrance causing or inviting the duet to close. I will only note here that the three dancers agree on not expanding the current duet into a trio.

As Giacomo and Simon leave the stage, Ana self-selects as a dancer and enters from the right and crosses the front of the stage. She then moves towards the center of the stage in a curved trajectory (Fig. 2). The trajectory thus produced shows an orientation towards Daniel, as if Ana was drawn towards him as she progresses on stage.

Ana also decelerates until she stands still, facing Daniel, who makes a few steps towards her, looking at her and raising his right (Fig. 2) and then left palm

towards her (Fig. 3). He then also comes to a stop, suspending a step he was about to make. The two dancers are now clearly oriented towards each other, producing an F-Formation (Kendon, 1990). Yet the three-meter distance they maintain between them suggests that this is an F-Formation for dance rather than for ordinary verbal exchange, which commonly involves less distance. The issue is more about making each other accessible than about circumscribing a space that excludes others: the stillness and the open palm suggest that they make themselves available to each other for dancing.

These gestures and movements constitute what is happening as the beginning of a duet, with mutual recognition and ratification. The dance is now available to be produced and seen as a duet. As Goffman (1963) pointed out, co-presence does not guarantee a focused interaction, the initiation of which has to go through a form of ratification (Goffman, 1981).

It may be surprising to speak of a duet when several other people are present and active on stage. In the case at hand, there is a cellist (visible on Fig. 3), a flutist and a singer improvising the music for the dance. I will show later that the dancers display orientations towards the music, that is thus part of the choreography, but do not treat the musicians as dance partners, liable to participate in other bodily engagements than playing their instruments or singing. The musicians seem to agree by maintaining this supporting and lateral figure, remaining at the same place and restricting themselves to producing music, confirming that they do not claim a status of ratified dancers.

In contrast, the persons sitting on benches in front of the stage constitute an audience. Though the duet displays a general orientation towards being seen by an audience, the dancers do not specifically address the audience members during the duet. While the audience members or the musicians may claim a dance partner status by engaging into the ongoing duet, it must be noted that they refrain from doing so, thereby constituting the duet as, at least so far, meeting the practical requirements of an improvised dance.[4]

It should also be noted that both dancers made their duet accountable through specific improvised dance resources: they have not agreed upon it beforehand nor have they talked it into being; what they did was made only and entirely through bodily movements, discovered and invented on the spot.

Getting Closer

Now that the dancers have laid the foundations of a visible and ratified duet, let us look at the rest of the dance to see what they do in and as *this* duet.

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[4] The video camera and its operator are part of the visible environment and are certainly taken into account by the participants, although it is difficult to say more. In the filmed corpus, I found no instance of manifest orientation to them in the course of an improvised dance. This may be due to the fact that this company routinely video-records most of its activities. The video camera seems to be part of the scenery, but it does not enter as such in any dance activity. As camera operator, I sticked to observational participation.

Fig. 4 (0′21''): Ana's explosive move

Fig. 5 (0′22''): Daniel engages in the same wide and fast movements as Ana

Dancing at a Distance

The stabilization described above is broken by an explosive movement of Ana (Fig. 4), followed by wide and fast movements, mobilizing the whole body, that are quickly also engaged in by Daniel (Fig. 5).

This first example could mislead the reader into thinking that collective improvised dance amounts to mirroring the partner's movements. As Zubarik (2013: 276) aptly phrases it: "the dancers do not imitate the outward form of their partner's movement, but their own movement emerges from what they feel to be the movement their partner is striving for". We will see much more complex and fluid coordination in the rest of the analysis.[5]

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[5] One of the interviewees even considered Ana's explosive move as inadequate, in that, being so disruptive with what just preceded, she was unilaterally imposing it on her partner, who had no other option than to mirror it. Even if other interviewees did not share this assessment, it is precisely because such moves are rare that a sequential turn-taking system has only occasional relevance for improvised dance coordination.

Fig. 6 (1′03''): Ana and Daniel adopt a stabilized posture

The two dancers then embark on a clearly distinct phase of about 40 seconds. This phase can be glossed as a dance at a distance, made, just like its initiation by Ana, of fast and wide, spectacular movements, involving the whole body in motion. Even if there is not a very close coordination between the dancers, they nevertheless agree on the following points: they synchronize their setting in movement, by accelerations and amplifications, followed by slowing down and shrinking, quite clearly adjusted to the music, which, similarly and more or less simultaneously, provides for intensification and acceleration, followed by relief and deceleration. Even if they sometimes come very close, the dancers do not make contact. The high and sustained mobility they both maintain throughout the phase would make contact unlikely anyway, since it would require temporal and spatial coordination that would be difficult to obtain, except in the form of collisions, which they clearly avoid. This description could of course be much refined by specifying all the micro-decisions and moves that make it happen. Instead of doing this, I will simply note that the dancers seem to agree on the co-production of the *kinetic bodily logos* that I have just glossed. This *kinetic bodily logos* does not provide for direct contacts between them. While they unquestionably dance together, they do not touch each other. What they do touch, however, is the floor of the stage. Sharing the same barefoot contact with the wooden floor (with a thin plastic coating) provides important information, in terms of, e.g., hardness, resistance, adherence, for specifying what can and cannot be done on and from it. I will not explore this phase further, in order to concentrate on transitions to other phases, which bring more to the development of the choreographic narrative.

Dancing Closer

After 40 seconds of this dance at a distance, the dancers operate a transition. Ana approaches the harp at the back of the stage (Fig. 6). She turns to face her partner and the audience, and adopts a resting posture (Streeck, 2018) with both feet on the floor, right hand on the harp, and left hand on the hip. Daniel anchors both feet to

Fig. 7 (1′07''): Ana and Daniel anchor themselves to the ground

Fig. 8 (1′11''): Ana comes close to Daniel, still anchored to the ground


the floor and turns his face toward Ana. They thus reinstall an F-Formation quite similar to the one that launched the duet except for Daniel's body torque,[6] which suggests that Ana's resting posture caused him to freeze.

Then Ana kneels down briefly. Daniel seems to echo this movement by pivoting around his left foot and extending both arms towards the ground, until they touch it, while his right foot rises like a counterweight (Fig. 7).

The two dancers are now more firmly anchored to the ground, which considerably restricts their immediate movement possibilities. The musicians adjust to this by "stabilizing the music," which has little rhythm, and consists more of a sound carpet. Daniel is however more immobilized by his position, a significant part of the weight of his body resting on his two hands on the ground. This arrangement seems to be exploited by Ana who gets back on her feet, quickly walks towards Daniel and

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[6] Schegloff (1998) notes that while body torque "project[s] postural instability," it can also be made into a home or resting position (Sacks & Schegloff, 2002; Streeck, 2018), as when planting an elbow ascribes stability to the body torque. Daniel's body torque seems to achieve some stability while maintaining the body's tension.

(a) **(b)**
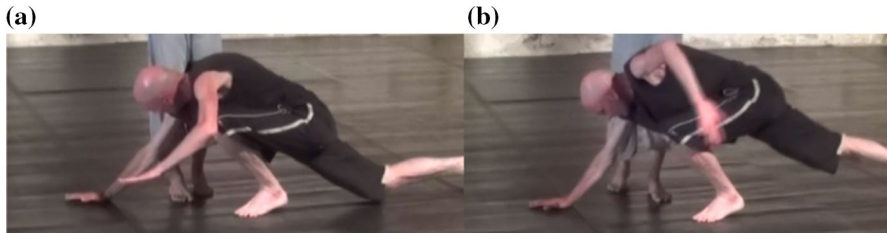
Fig. 9 **a–b** (1′16''-1′17''): Ana pulls back her right foot

(a) **(b)**

Fig. 10 **a–b** (1′19''-1′21''): Daniel moves in concert with Ana

stops very close to him, raising both her arms (Fig. 8). When Daniel perceives Ana's arrival, he adopts a theatrically submissive posture, placing his right knee and foot on the ground and raising his left hand as if to protect his head.

From this close posture, which does not allow much movement, the dancers have to figure out how to continue the dance. Ana puts her hands together as if hugging someone or something. Daniel then begins to straighten up by unfolding his legs but he stops halfway (Fig. 9b). It is during this that Ana initiates a slight movement by stepping back with her right foot (Fig. 9a, b) then her left foot, projecting a retreat towards the back of the stage.

Daniel takes this movement into account by not straightening up completely, keeping his right hand in contact with the ground. He lands his right foot behind Ana (Fig. 10a), which makes him able to move in concert with her (Fig. 10b).

Having thus developed a close and joint movement, the dancers move back about two meters towards the back of the stage. During this move, Ana holds both hands down, close to Daniel's head (Fig. 11).

At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to point out here that the dancers, though very close to each other and closely coordinated, still do not touch each other. So far in the choreography, one could wonder what contact might change or bring that has not yet been already achieved by the dancers. In interviews, dancers emphasize that touch starts way before the actual skin contact, one of the dancers considering for example that, in the interview configuration, interviewer and interviewee were touching each other, even without contact, through words, gazes, postures and movements. This conception of touch should not be reduced to a simple metaphor for focused interaction,

Fig. 11 (1′23''): Ana and Daniel jointly move towards the back wall

Fig. 12 (1′29''): Ana raises her arms

i.e., a state of mutual attention and influence. Merleau-Ponty for his part suggested on the one hand to consider vision as touching the world at a distance (1964), and verbal utterances as gestures on the other (1969). More praxiologically, improvising dance implies to make one's body willing and available to react to invitations prompted by the unfolding situation, especially those that emanate multi-sensorially from the partner's body, be it through postures, movements, gazes, perceivable breathing, sounds, odors… and contacts. Reaching contact should then be understood as an extension of the various forms of interaction that preceded it rather than breaking with them. Yet,

Fig. 13 (1′33''): Daniel raises
his right hand over Ana's head

Fig. 14 (1′35''): Getting into
contact

after having described how the dancers reach contact, I will point out some conse-
quences that are specific to contact in the conduct of a joint dance improvisation.

Touching Each Other

Getting in Touch

During their joint retreat towards the back of the stage, Ana has held both hands down,
close to Daniel's head (Fig. 11). As she approaches the wall that forms the back of the
stage, Ana slowly raises her arms (Fig. 12).

Moving in concert with Ana towards the back wall, Daniel has reiterated an up and down movement of his right hand. Following the rise of Ana's hands, he ends up moving his right arm up until his hand goes over Ana's head (Fig. 13).

Maintaining the great fluidity that characterizes this whole phase, Ana accompanies the rise of Daniel's hand and wraps her hand around his, resulting in the first (skin) contact since the beginning of the duet (Fig. 14).

Expanding the Contact

In an interview, a dancer explained a problem with contact in improvised dance: "Once you touch someone, what are you going to do next? Devour each other?" By humorously revisiting the "what next" question well-known to sequential analysts, the interviewee recalled that reaching contact is not an end, since, unless they want it to be a closure, the dancers have to devise a next move to expand the choreography, "to move a bit further away". Nor is reaching contact an end *in itself*, since improvised dance is not teleologically oriented towards contact. As we have seen, the dancers put up a lot of effort to make their contact happen as a next natural move in the continuous flow[7] of a *kinetic bodily logos*. Reaching contact is not to achieve a general goal of improvised dance. Rather, the dancers go about their dance and make contact when it appears required by the current *kinetic bodily logos*. The ethnomethodological notion of reflexivity helps here to avoid the traps of an over-simplified agency. The dancers are reflexively constrained by the choreography that is assembled by each of their unscripted indexical moves. They are thus as much passive as they are active, subjects as objects.

Yet, reaching contact might be a problem to the dancers, whatever their agentive status, since it almost always accomplishes a transition to something else in the unfolding choreography. In the duet so far, there has quite clearly been a first mutual recognition of dancers, a dance at a distance and a phase of coming closer which reached an apex in the contact. In line with Sheets-Johnstone's notion of thinking in movement, this cutting into phases of the choreography so far is not an interpretation of what the dancers expressed. It is rather a summary description of the dynamic transformations of the *kinetic bodily logos* that the dancers seemed to agree upon and made intelligible to the audience.

Let us see now how they practically resolve the specific "what next" problem that contact raises. If we compare this phase of coming together, punctuated by touch, with the preceding one, we see that the dancers have operated, together, a transition towards a phase marked by proximity and conjunction, made visible by the great fluidity of their contact. This aspect is taken into account by the musicians who tend to produce intense and plaintive music, with little rhythm.

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[7] Macbeth (2012: 201) addresses a similar form of coordination within a dynamic field when he describes a successful basketball pass: "[Y]ou and another jointly produce the developing coherence of a pass that begins with the release of the ball to a place on the floor where no one is yet standing, but is becoming, *as* this projectable course, the synchronous arrival of the ball and another, whose arrivals both *evidence* the play, and *then* revise the field for finding and producing next possibilities."

Fig. 15 (1′37''): The grip

Fig. 16 (1′38''): Ana's body descends backwards

Fig. 17 (1′42''): Starting another circle dance

It should also be noted that the dancers did not simply touch each other. Each wrapped his/her hand around the other's wrist, producing a very strong mutual grip (Fig. 15).

Fig. 18 (2′00′′): The heads come close

Ana immediately exploits this grip and the resistance and counterweight it offers by letting her body descend backwards. Daniel obviously offers this resistance, which allows Ana to touch the ground with her right forearm (Fig. 16).

The resistance offered by the grip also allows Ana to initiate a tightly entangled circle dance with Daniel (Fig. 17). As Jeannerod (1997: 32), quoted (and complemented) in Streeck (2009: 50f.), makes clear, "it is the intended activity [not the object per se, J.S.] that is the main determinant of the type of grip for each given action".

Invited to comment on this contact, interviewees underlined the importance and the specificity of the communication offered by touch. As both touching and being touched, each dancer in contact obtains and provides many indications and specifications in terms of strength, structure, stability, resistance, directions but also willingness to "move a bit further away".

This communication through touch raises specific problems that were addressed by an interviewee. Contact is visible, but seeing contact is only a small part of the experience of being in contact. The dancers can certainly see their making of contact, but the actual sensory experience of contact gives them access to layers of their interaction which are not visible, and are as such inaccessible to the audience.

This calls the dancers to a specific vigilance: it is sometimes necessary to freeze a current movement in order to delay a next one that the contact has already made obvious to the two dancers, so that the public can see it, or understand it on a visual basis. We thus understand that the dancers not only have to coordinate between themselves. They also share the concern to produce a dance performance that is intelligible to an audience, which implies taking into account the complex distribution of sensory experiences among the different participants. The problem can also arise on stage when two dancers in contact have to make their joint moves intelligible to one or several dance partners, or musicians, they are not in contact with.

Fig. 19 (2′06′′): Ana's right hand seizes Daniels right wrists

Fig. 20 (2′09′′): Ana passes through Daniel's legs while maintaining contact

"Devouring Each Other"?

After a few steps of circle dance, the dancers stop and come closer. Ana grabs Daniel's garment at belly level with her free hand. Both dancers straighten up, releasing the strong grip of their hands. Their heads come close. Daniel brings his now free hand up to Ana's grinning face (Fig. 18).

While, on the video recording, Daniel's body hides what his left hand and Ana's hands are doing, it still can be seen that, although contact may have been broken, the two bodies remain narrowly entangled. While straightening up, Ana repositions her right foot at an equal distance from Daniel's two feet (Fig. 18), which provides her with a firm footing.

At this point, the *kinetic bodily logos* is very tense, arguably the climax of the duet so far. Postures, gestures and faces display a great tension between the dancers, which nicely instantiates the "what next" problem mentioned before: what can dancers do with their duet at this point, except "devouring each other"? Part of the alternative they

Fig. 21 (2′14′′): "Recovering" Ana's hand

Fig. 22 (2′16′′): Daniel grabs Ana's right foot

Fig. 23 (2′25′′): Ana uses Daniel's support to raise her legs and twist her body

Fig. 24 (2′45′′): Maintaining contact

Fig. 25 (3′03′′): Ana straightens up and looks down on Daniel

will devise lies in the firm footing that Ana has ensured. Contrary to the previous circle dancing where sustaining each of the dancers' extreme backward position crucially depended on the counterweight provided by the partner's body, here Ana and Daniel, though narrowly entangled, have a relative autonomy of movement.

Disentanglement

No longer reliant on Daniel's bodily resistance, Ana first appears to withdraw, then flexes her legs. While descending, Ana slowly moves her right hand, which previously held Daniel's garment, towards Daniel's right wrist (Fig. 19), renewing the briefly interrupted contact.

Ana then discovers a disentanglement solution by passing her body between Daniel's legs. We see that she is concerned with maintaining contact by moving her right hand from Daniel's right hand to his left (Fig. 20).

Daniel actively contributes to the fluidity of the passing by "recovering" Ana's hand with his right hand on the other side of his two legs (Fig. 21).

Fig. 26 (3′18''): Bickering circle dance

While he eventually lets go of Ana's hand, he still ensures continued contact by grabbing Ana's right foot (Fig. 22) and then also her left foot as he turns and straightens (Fig. 23).

Ana, whose upper body is on the ground, then supports herself with her feet on Daniel's standing body, especially his hands, to extend the contact. This support allows her to twist her body.

When Ana is on her back again, Daniel seems to release himself from her touch, by theatrically raising his hands off of her feet. But Ana is careful to maintain contact as her feet move down Daniel's body (Fig. 24).

The two dancers engage in a phase of moving away and closer together, during which they nevertheless always maintain contact between Ana's feet and Daniel's lower left leg, as if "stuck together," sometimes, for Ana, at the cost of acrobatic and athletic postures. After several reiterations of such attraction–repulsion movements, Daniel falls backwards onto his right hand, while Ana finally breaks the contact by "taking off" her feet from Daniel's leg. She then quickly stands up and, after a spin, faces Daniel, whom she now looks down on after the reversal of positions (Fig. 25).

During this last phase of attraction–repulsion, the work done by the two dancers to separate fluidly and organically is displayed to the point of excess. Just as it is not possible to rush into contact, it is not possible to interrupt it abruptly. Like the making of contact, the ending of contact must be prepared by the dancers, in order to make it the indexically appropriate way to "move a little further".[8]

Once separated, the dancers engage in a highly theatrical circle dance. Increasingly distancing themselves from each other and bickering with each other through hand gestures and non-verbal vocalizations (Fig. 26), their dance marks a maximum contrast with the rather fusional phase of the contact, which seems to have resolved into a form of argument.

The entrance on stage of two new dancers suggests that the conflictual separation phase of Ana and Daniel's duet can be seen and treated as its closure, and as such

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[8] Keevallik (2021) studies how participants in Lindy Hop dance lessons 'couple up' by holding each other, and release that hold when the teacher interrupts the dance for instructions or corrections. Though the Lindy Hopp lessons are quite remote from an improvised duet, both dance practices exhibit a similar preferential orientation towards mutual and synchronized hold and release.

launch the next duet. Ana and Daniel seem to align with this by quickly leaving the stage, without engaging into focused interaction with the newcomers.

Conclusion: Accountable, but not too Much

In this paper I have described a three-and-a-half-minute duet in improvised dance. My account was based on the witnessable order of the duet which I attempted to communicate through textual descriptions and pictures. More precisely, I have presented distinct phases characterized by a specific *kinetic bodily logos*, and transitions between them, upon which the dancers seemed to practically agree.

As the final "bickering" circle dance clearly illustrates, there were theatrical elements that undoubtedly contributed to the intelligibility of the choreography. Those theatrical elements composed the narrative of two individuals who first recognize each other, then engage in a parade, get closer, merge into a couple, nearly devour each other, disentangle, enter a phase of attraction–repulsion and eventually part ways acrimoniously. It is certainly, among other things, because of its narrative intelligibility that I chose this duet, but I would like to conclude this text with some nuancing remarks on this intelligibility.

First the duet owes part of its theatricality to the fact that Daniel is a comedian more than a dancer, while Ana is an experienced dancer and the instructor of the workshop. All interviewees identified this theatricality in the duet, but interestingly, they noted how Ana, rather than Daniel, integrated theatricality on her dance. Ana quickly identified the theatricality of her partner, and treated it as a relevant element of the unfolding choreography, rather than for example ignoring it or correcting it. It is this ability to integrate an element of the situation into the choreography, in other words, to *dance* it, that may exhibit Ana's expertise as opposed to the relative inexperience of Daniel.

Another aspect of this asymmetry lies in the fact that many important transitions were initiated by Ana, and "followed" by Daniel. Yet, again, Ana's expertise lies more in the fact that when one sees the duet, it appears as a duet, with mostly joint transitions, rather than as being led and initiated by Ana, and followed and obeyed by Daniel. While it clearly requires much attention and availability from Daniel, especially when he perceives and elaborates on Ana's invitations, it is largely due to Ana's ability to produce a visibly joint and fluidly organic *kinetic bodily logos*, rather than, say, a dance lesson. These rather hypothetical considerations should be confronted with different duets, for instance with two beginners or two experienced dancers, in further studies.

Yet, beyond the specificity of its two members, the improvised duet studied here displays its own intelligibility, or rather *accountability*, since *intelligibility* may retain some implications of verbal meaning. This accountability appears to lie precisely in a limited intelligibility, in the sense that it should not be too straightforwardly interpretable. An interviewee said that his intent as a dancer was to be a signifier rather than a signified, and that a body on stage was already too symbolic (in his own words, too "anthropomorphic") to further underline its meaning through a signifying gesture.

Take for example the open vertical palm that Daniel presents and reiterates to Ana as she enters the stage and turns towards him (see Fig. 2 and 3). This gesture could be described as a greeting, an expression of goodwill or, alternatively, a warning not to go any further. Rather than choosing on the basis of infinitely arguable criteria, I just noted that along this gesture Ana decelerates and stops, facing Daniel, thereby displaying to him and the audience that they now constitute a duet. This is accountable as a dance moment in the first place, before any of its eventual verbal formulation and interpretation. And it is important to remember that the dancers have to *dance* this moment from within, for themselves and to an audience, before they have any opportunity, if at all, to elaborate it from outside.

This leads me to a final remark on accountability and touch. As I noted, touching dancers gain access to otherwise inaccessible elements on the availability and potentialities of their partner. This provides them with distinct resources for the joint production of a *kinetic bodily logos*. As one interviewee remarked, this may be even too symbiotic, in that it may be too fast for the audience to understand the joint move, which the dancers thus have to slow down or even delay.

This may help to specify *improvised* dance accountability, as opposed to other improvised practices such as jazz piano, aikido or basketball, which have also distinct accountabilities for practitioners and audience. An improvised dance audience does not expect for example the high degree of synchronicity and coordination that can be seen in ballet. The improvised nature of the dance has to manifest itself in some form of asynchronicity, and even some erratic moments in the choreography. It can hardly be only asynchronized and erratic, but it cannot any more be completely synchronized. Improvised choreography has to appear as manufactured on the spot and afresh, as the contingent meeting of idiosyncratic dancers on a stage. The exceptional intercorporal communication that touch affords may then cause a specific problem to improvised dancers, who may sometimes have to attenuate or even disregard some of its symbiotic opportunities to maintain an accountable improvised dance, and thus keep "moving a bit further away".

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