

# IMPROV- ISATION AND SOCIAL AESTHET- ICS

GEORGINA BORN, ERIC LEWIS,  
AND WILL STRAW, EDS.

*Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice*

A NEW SERIES EDITED BY DANIEL FISCHLIN

Books in this new series advocate musical improvisation as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action—for imagining and creating alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. The books are collaborations among performers, scholars, and activists from a wide range of disciplines. They study the creative risk-taking imbued with the sense of movement and momentum that makes improvisation an exciting, unpredictable, ubiquitous, and necessary endeavor.

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The 2010 conference, itself called Improvisation and Social Aesthetics, was a vibrant and successful experimental event that brought together a number of participants in the ICASP research area with other Canadian and international scholars working on improvisation and social aesthetics in relation to music and a range of other art and performance forms. The conference was co-sponsored by ICASP and the Schulich School of Music at McGill; it was organized by Lisa Barg and Eric Lewis. All participants in the conference have chapters in this volume, with the exceptions of Amelia Jones and Jason Stanyek (who declined to contribute) and Will Straw (who is, however, a co-editor). We thank our contributors, as well as those who participated in the conference, for their commitment to this exciting and creative collective project.

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## CHAPTER 12

### DEVICES OF EXISTENCE

#### Contact Improvisation, Mobile Performances, and Dancing through Twitter

Susan Kozel

"Devices of existence" are the mechanisms, movements, and media of life (Bourriaud 2002, 103). The expression is borrowed from Nicolas Bourriaud's writing on relational aesthetics, but in this chapter on dance improvisation and social aesthetics, the word "device" takes on several meanings that extend beyond Bourriaud. It is used as both a noun and a verb: improvisation is frequently a tool for *devising* a performance; the literal and metaphorical *devices of life* become either content or context within dance; and our *media devices* (mobile phones, computers) become vehicles for the presentation or creation of movement. Bourriaud acts as a starting point for these reflections, but his formulation of relationality is not necessarily social; nor is it particularly embodied. Jacques Rancière's (2009a) writing on aesthetics takes us further along the path toward a sensory approach to social aesthetics, and finally, the play of improvisation and intercorporeality in two unconventional dance events is addressed by a reading of Jacques Derrida's (2005) role for the anesthetic within the aesthetic, the insensible within the sensible. Rancière's framing of aesthetics as a reconfiguration of forms of perception combined with Derrida's thoughts on the anesthetic yield a way to account for the less immediate, less celebrated qualities of social aesthetic experience, such as anticipation, delay, and uncertainty, as well as the disintegration and reconstruction of memory.

Two dance events will be considered: *Small Acts* (2010) by the choreographer Ben Wright, performed at the Skånes Dansteater in Malmö, Swe-

den, and the IntuiTweet project (2009–2010) by Mia Keinänen, Susan Kozel, and Leena Rouhiainen occurring in the networked digital space of Twitter and Short Message Texting (SMS). My perspective on these improvisations comes from different phenomenological positions: with *Small Acts* I was a member of the audience, and with IntuiTweet I was one of the dance artists.<sup>1</sup> *Small Acts*, a dance performance with multiple choreographic layers, generates reflections on the transformation of relations between performer and audience, distributing and recombining the dance so that those who watch also contribute their own improvised movements to it. IntuiTweet used Twitter as the media/medium for improvisational exchanges and asked whether bodily intuition could exist within social networking. This project yielded unexpected insight into the variations of touch across distance, making it an unusual example of contact improvisation: the contact between dancers was palpable but asynchronous and dislocated. Dancers were not located in the same place or time, and movement was mediated not just by technology but by words. Motion was transferred through text messages.

This chapter enacts three theoretical shifts. The first is to consider social aesthetics not through improvisation in general, but through contact improvisation in dance. The second is to refigure contact improvisation—frequently viewed in terms of a somewhat athletic practice of leaps, supports, inversions, and falls—into a practice based on touch: touch between audience members and performers and touch between dancers through mobile technologies. The third shift is to see touch according to a phenomenological experience of contact; as something that is ceaselessly interrupted. Contact implicitly becomes "con-tact," with a hiatus in the middle of it that makes a dynamic slippage integral to the sense of touch (Derrida 2005, 229). These shifts will provide an opening for relational aesthetics to be applied to dance events and expand the notion of contact improvisation so that it might be useful for other art forms. Further, the improvisation practices illuminated in the two dance events can be seen as models for social interaction in a more general sense, the creation or re-creation of bonds between people giving rise to "new modes of confrontation or participation" (Rancière 2009a, 21).

#### The Intimate Bedlam of *Small Acts*

*Small Acts* was a performance that invited audience members to travel through all areas of the Skånes Dansteatre building in the Western Harbor district of Malmö to discover the movement of the dancers.<sup>2</sup> The mobility

and the improvisation of this piece will be read through the actions not of the dancers but of the audience members. The notion of audience generally applied to theater and dance events implies containment and singularity (we refer to “an” audience, and it tends to be planted in numbered seats facing forward) that are not appropriate to the mobile, fluctuating group of people who visited *Small Acts*. This dance event did not occur in a theatrical space as much as it transformed the working parts of a theater into an array of public spaces; as such, we were less like audience members than like members of the public. With the assistance of maps, we journeyed through the innards of the building. We walked the backstage corridors, crowded into the workshops and wardrobe, ventured into rehearsal studios, and noticed small meeting rooms silently waiting to be animated by bodies. The only space we skirted was the black box theater itself; it remained quiet and dark.

We peered over others’ shoulders to see dancers performing steps that navigated qualities between the lightness of studio movement and the weight of street movement. The dancers wore a jumbled array of outdoor clothing and shoes, exuding a sense of delight at being part of the intimate bedlam of dancing around and among 250 peripatetic members of the public. Rooms and passages of opaque plastic, illuminated by fluorescent bar lights along the floor, were built within rehearsal studios and workshops. These structures became important filtering devices as both dancers and public entered and exited like fluid pouring into and out of containers. The category of relational art is not applied as readily to dance as to other practices that stem from the visual and sculptural domains, but the dynamic and ephemeral qualities of dance, when combined with experimentation in conventions of viewing and use of space such as that which occurred with this piece, invite aesthetic formulations of relationality. *Small Acts* constructed “undecided situations” for the audience members, producing “a displacement of perception, a passage from status of spectator to that of actor, and a reconfiguration of places” (Ranci re 2009a, 23–24).

Frequently it was impossible to find a place inside these crowded little rooms, and the movement had to be witnessed from outside. Watching the silhouettes of people and listening to their shuffling and breathing, it was possible to infer or imagine what might be happening inside the rooms. The process of finding the dance became a bit of a scavenger hunt: following other audience members, pursuing a dancer who dashed from one location to another down corridors or up stairs, or deciding to walk against the flow along a seemingly deserted hallway. This was a highly social event not just because of the feeling of being in a slightly chaotic and crowded pub-

lic space while trying to view a performance, but because the rhythm of the experience was measured differently from more formal choreography. The improvisation of the dancers seemed to occur in between choreographic sequences and was shaped by members of the public simply by virtue of our being present and obstructing the paths of the dancers in our attempts to see what was happening. On a subtler level, the rhythm of the improvisation was affected by attempts on the part of the public to anticipate where the movement might go next. It is possible to say that anticipation is one of the modes of improvisation—in this case, anticipation on the part of the audience members, not just the performers. The state of anticipation is ambiguous. It cannot be pinned to specific senses but is powerfully affective and is crucial for dance improvisation. It is like an inhalation of breath, a moment of suspension that is not beyond the senses but is not tied explicitly to them, either. It is an enhanced state of receptivity, a breathing space where anticipation opens onto imagination and is tinged with memory.

Up to a point, Bourriaud’s (2002, 18) formulation of relational aesthetics is helpful in understanding the improvisation of the audience members in *Small Acts*—for example, relational art “is a state of encounter” rather than an object as such. With *Small Acts*, it is clear that my movements through the rooms and corridors, in concert with that of other members of the public and the dancers, were the very fabric of the aesthetic experience. This piece came to being through public interaction—or improvisation—between the dancers and the public. The choreography was not a pattern of movement that could exist on its own; without those who participated as audience members it would not exist. Bourriaud continues to shed light on the experience, for it is true that the scope of the piece was more than just an encounter among people. It encompassed human interactions and a particular social context rather than a private symbolic space (14). The cultural symbolic space of the theater was inverted so that the public spaces within the theater building became private or closed off, and the normally private spaces were opened to performance. Yet if we read him more closely, it is evident that Bourriaud’s focus remains largely with the art object: it may be rendered transitive, dynamic, dialogic, open-ended, and multiple, but relationality remains a structural response to an artistic ancien r gime of generating static and contained artwork. “Transitivity,” he writes, “is as old as the hills. It is a tangible property of the artwork. Without it, the work is nothing other than a dead object, crushed by contemplation” (26). Transitivity is the “formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue” mapped onto an object. Even his evocative explanation of form as “a lasting encounter” or

a “principle of dynamic agglutination” takes its perspective from the object rather than squarely from the social, let alone from the corporeal (19–21). For him, art invents new relations “to the body” or “to the ‘mysteries’ of life and death,” as if art and body were objects juxtaposed, rather than art’s being inseparable from the experience of bodies (92).

Obviously, this is a phenomenologist’s critique of Bourriaud: I cannot help but experience the world through my body. And it is equally a dancer’s critique: my knowledge is corporeal, and there can be no real distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, even though they may coexist unevenly. Still, it is not desirable to dismiss Bourriaud too quickly, for he excels at the poetic encapsulation, if not at its elaboration. When he writes, “By creating and staging devices of existence including working methods and ways of being, instead of concrete objects which hitherto bounded the realm of art, the artists use time as a material” (Bourriaud 2002, 103), he provides a rough outline of a dynamic aesthetic ontology. Without heading off on too much of a tangent at this point, it is important to point out that the approach to aesthetics in this chapter is ontological, accessed by means of a variation on phenomenology. This is to say that these reflections are not concerned with formal structures of the work or its meaning as much as they reveal the dynamic ebb and flow of states of encounter of all the participants, where everyone is, in some sense, a performer. This dynamic ontology is brought to life by experimental work such as *Small Acts* and IntuiTweet.

*Small Acts* invited shifts in perception regarding what was expected from a dance and who was defined as a dancer. This experience was as much about glimpses of dance, and traces of dance, as it was about actually seeing dance in a standard performative mode, where sight lines are clear and movement is constructed to face forward toward a bank of seats. I arrived at a room just as the audience and dancers left, and for a moment felt I was mis-timing my choices of where to go and whom to follow. The action seemed to be eluding me. I turned the corner of a plastic-walled room just as the last person had scurried out of it in search of further dance, and my internal narratives and expectations washed over me. I am not doing this properly, I thought. I am missing something in another room. Which room? I did not know. The dance over there might be more interesting than the non-dance here. I experienced a strange numbness because I did not know how to respond to what I was sensing; then a sudden, unexpected shift in perception made the heat and residual vibrations of movement evident. I began to sense the space: dance happened here a moment ago. It was palpable, and I found myself imagining what I had just missed. In this moment

my aesthetic experience coincided with Rancière’s (2009a, 14) reformulation of aesthetics as a way to identify art when the border between art and not art is increasingly challenged *and*, more important, as a “redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience.” In other words, dance that embraces what might be called “non-dance” is art both because of its experiments with aesthetic convention and because of the impact it has on the performers and audience: it scrambles our sensory perception.<sup>3</sup> What seems at first like chaos or one’s expectations being cruelly thwarted (“Why can I never really see what the dancers are doing?”) are actually alternative orderings of senses and meaning. “Aesthetics,” he writes, “is the thought of the new disorder” (13). *Small Acts* offered a glimpse into this disorder: experience of the dancers was mediated by my having to navigate cramped spaces and unexpected breaks in movement (dancers leaving the space); further, concrete sense perception (what I actually saw) collided with memory and imagination (what I thought I saw, what I might see). I did not see the dance directly, but I heard it; I sensed it kinesthetically; I anticipated, recalled, or imagined it, all while it was happening. Further, this “new disorder” of relational aesthetics is not a solitary experience. The ways we navigated, perceived, anticipated, and recollected a performance were reconfigured across multiple bodies.

Finding myself in a room recently vacated by the *Small Acts* dancers and by the cohort of audience members who had managed to squeeze in, the decision became one of staying where I was, in this room still resonating with movement, or going somewhere else to find more dance. The dance outside the room became increasingly compelling because I did not know where or what it was or which combination of dancers might reconfigure. The decision to stay where I was and to absorb the no-longer-there-yet-still-palpable dance was a crucial moment, because the dance was very much present, but differently. In the space, like a ripple on my skin, I remembered the movement I had just seen and reconstructed what I had just missed with both my memory and my imagination. I was already inventing the story of the dance that had just happened. In this way, I contributed to the aesthetic construction in which I was participating. The many disappearances of dance I experienced with *Small Acts*, either because the choreography dissolved around me and dancers left the space one by one or because I chose to abandon a room with ongoing dance, were like breaks in the moments of contact, fissures in the immediacy of the experience.

A subtler interpretation of the roles played by anticipation and recollection in this sort of distributed performance is based on the acknowledgment

that one is always missing some part of the dance, that one has an awareness of what is not present. There is an absence of dance within the dance, and the sense of confusion or numbness I encountered before a burst of new sensation can be illuminated (or, some might say, rendered more confusing) by considering Derrida's role for the "anesthetic" within aesthetic experience.<sup>4</sup> Derrida (2005, 229) presents a phenomenological point of view, which is to say that he attempts to understand contact not just abstractly but based on an actual moment of contact or the lived experience of touch. What is revealed is that contact is suspended *in the middle* of the moment of contact; thus, an "anesthetic interruption" is embedded in the experience of contact.<sup>5</sup> This explains why he prefers to split the word "contact" with a hyphen, making it "con-tact." He writes that it is impossible to have contact *and* a sense (or understanding) of contact at the same time, but that we constantly slide between the two; taken from the perspective of improvisation, it is possible to say that moments of "non-contact" that confuse the senses and seem to be outside the fluidity of aesthetic experience are all part of the experience of contact.

The ripples of touch, of contact and losing contact, are rhythmic because they occur in syncopation. They occur across intervals. "Such haptical (or aesthetic in general) *différence*, which is interruption, interposition, detour of the between *in the middle* of contact, could analogically open onto what [Jean-Luc] Nancy calls a 'syncope' or what [Jean] Chrétien terms *interval*, the 'intervallic character of touch itself'" (Derrida 2005, 229). This rhythmic alternation between touch and not touching, contact and losing contact, resonates with Rancière's assertion that aesthetics is the reconfiguration of the relations among forms of sensory experience. When senses are reconfigured, they slip in and out of familiar patterns. Derrida goes on to say that there is a necessity of "insensibility within sensibility," as if the absence of sense is essential to sense. This addresses a basic but important motivation for aesthetic innovation—and, indeed, improvisation—which is that if we want to escape rigid habits that control what we see and how we move, we need to be interrupted by difference. That which is different can at first seem to be anesthetic, or nothing (229). The anesthetic or the insensible is not a deadening or an absence of sense—or, at least, not for long. It can be construed as that which is outside immediate experience, on its margins in the form of memory, anticipation, or confusion. Or it can be that which is simply not yet understood or comprehended, such as new artistic practices.

A duet between the dancers Graham Adey and Sam Denton took place in a small patch of a large studio on a layer of shredded black plastic that looked

like feathers or ashes. I found myself gratefully absorbing the movement of other bodies; receiving the movement felt like being stroked. Not just how I perceived art but how I received it became relevant. By this point in the performance, I had shifted to a far more expansive and receptive mode, less goal-directed. Perception is so frequently construed as outwardly focused and evaluative, while reception involves the permission to let something in or to be lured into it. There is a difference between being drawn into a movement exchange or being kept at a remove from the internal workings of a choreography and left to admire from the outside. It must be said that there is nothing wrong with the aesthetics of virtuosity and externality, and at times this is exactly what we desire from an artistic event, but *Small Acts* fostered a version of social aesthetics that is valuable for being inclusive, for stimulating thought and community. As an aesthetic experience it provided a moment of living in the world differently and, perhaps, with more openness and delight. The suggestion that watching dance can be like being stroked or absorbing the movement of another into the fabric of one's being implies that as a member of the audience I was not just in an improvisatory relationship with the performers (whereby they moved and I moved) but that the improvisation was based on contact. Touch, as metaphor and concrete experience, was the aesthetic foundation of this experience.

This is a good point to transition to a discussion of IntuiTweet, which was in part about offering one's movement to another so that it could be embodied and owned by someone else before being released again. These two projects are variations on a theme of con-tact.

### The Distributed Improvisation of IntuiTweet

IntuiTweet (2009–2010) occurs at a point of overlap between social aesthetics and social media. It was an experiment in improvisation initiated by three dancer-researchers (Mia Keinänen, Leena Rouhiainen, and me) in which we filtered moments of movement intuition through the medium of Twitter, the immensely popular social networking platform, so that they could be exchanged and transformed.<sup>6</sup> Before describing the details of the project, it is helpful to locate it in a broader cultural and intellectual context. IntuiTweet is part of a particular trend within digitally mediated aesthetics: artistic projects that transform modes of presentation and perception. Implied by such a transformation is "a break with the hierarchical order that determined which subjects and forms of expression were deemed worthy of inclusion in the domain of a given art" (Rancière 2009a, 10). At stake, Ran-



cière elaborates, is not just art but also “the ways in which our world is given to perceiving itself” and the way “powers that be assert their legitimacy” (15). This is what he refers to as the regime of art: a broad compilation of politics, intelligibility, and sensibility.

The hierarchical order, to use Rancière’s expression, did not manifest itself as hesitation on the part of dancers or the art world to embrace technology. Significant numbers of dancers, choreographers, programmers, and funding bodies in many countries create and support collaborative interdisciplinary work using a range of digital technologies. Twitter has been famously lambasted for being superficial, trivial, and, despite its undisputed place as a widespread social phenomenon, an enabler of people’s basest desires. It is regularly used as a trope in other cultural forms, such as journalism and television programming (from comedy to drama), to indicate dumbing down and sacrificing integrity.<sup>7</sup> Oddly, a strong current determining what was legitimate or acceptable behavior came not from the art world but from the attitudes, codes, and conventions surrounding the use of Twitter in general. The mechanisms for conformity emerging from within the Twitter community itself constrained its creative range as much as externally imposed attitudes. In effect, the hierarchical order came from within. Despite its crowd-sourced, decentralized, and do-it-yourself principles, there is a form of Twitter etiquette that dominates (for better and for worse) its use. According to several Twitter etiquette sites, Twitter should continue to be about answering the simple question, “What are you doing?” or, in its current version, “What’s happening?”<sup>8</sup> As one article states, “All tweets are prompted by the question ‘What are you doing?’ Many people don’t answer the question, and others are religious about it. Does it irritate people if you don’t answer the question? Sometimes. Should those people take a deep breath? Possibly.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, social networking needs to be insulated as much as possible from insulting, threatening, and abusive behavior, but other, softer directives for appropriate conduct coincide with Rancière’s concern over hierarchical orders that define expression and how a community perceives itself.<sup>10</sup> The shift initiated by IntuiTweet was to use Twitter not just to report what we were doing but also to explore what we were sensing or intuiting and how we were moving. This expressive mode exists in a gray zone, for Twitter etiquette tends to steer its users away from tweeting their personal states: “Your weirdly honest confession terrifies me” and “Don’t just post about you, you, you. Not only is this directly against what Twitter is all about, it will get you ignored quickly.”<sup>11</sup> Tweets are supposed to be about what you are doing, but only within a narrow band of acceptable actions and

emotions; also, a lot of “re-tweeting” is expected. Further, there have been instances of vocal segments of the Twitter community being particularly condemnatory of women posting about their bodies. There were loud objections to the blogger Meghan McCain posting of a photo that revealed her cleavage (“Fellow Tweeters bullied her for showing off her bust line”<sup>12</sup>), and other direct and politically controversial articulations of women’s bodily experiences, which would have been acceptable in other media, were loudly condemned. In 2009, Penelope Trunk was “excoriated” for tweeting about having a miscarriage while sitting in a business meeting,<sup>13</sup> and a year later, Angie Johnson was lambasted for chronicling how an abortion felt physically and emotionally.<sup>14</sup> While the content of Trunk’s and Johnson’s tweets is more explicit and politically sensitive than the tweets we exchanged, both women’s use of social networking coincides with the phenomenological approach adopted by IntuiTweet. Collectively, these body tweets exist on a spectrum of corporeal reflection, from visceral and intimate to kinesthetic and poetic. It can be argued that, by taking a phenomenological turn and using Twitter to express and exchange what we were sensing or intuiting and how we were moving, at any given moment we were actually answering a combination of the core Twitter questions, “What is happening?” and “What are you doing?”

So what, exactly, was IntuiTweet? It took place in specifically determined improvisation periods, usually between seven and ten days. There were a limited number of primary participants (Keinänen, Rouhiainen, and me, plus up to three invited guests) and an unlimited number of followers through Twitter. With the exception of one improvisation, when we were together in Helsinki, the improvisations occurred across several countries and time zones (Russia, Finland, Norway, Denmark, France, and the United States). Our instructions were simple: we were tasked with noticing moments of movement sensation or movement *intuition* throughout our day, no matter where we found ourselves. No one really knows exactly what movement intuition is; this task was to contribute to exploring and understanding it. We translated what we noticed into a tweet of no more than 140 characters and sent it to the others using Twitter’s SMS function.<sup>15</sup> When a tweet was received as a text message, the instructions were to improvise the movement we received, but how or when we improvised was open. We could immediately respond as though we had received an actual movement impulse—and it frequently felt like this—or we could hold on to the moment of movement and improvise a response later in the day or the next day, once we were in a different place. The other alternative was to improvise subtly,



through imagination or by means of somatic response. In other words, we could enact a shift in body state rather than a repositioning of our limbs in time and space. Once this response was generated, we recoded it into a tweet and sent it off once again to join the flurry of movement messages between us. This was a crucial part of the improvisation and created an ongoing movement dialogue between us. A rolling, asynchronous ebb and flow of dynamic and kinesthetic exchanges was created by converging dance improvisation and social networking.

The instructions were quite playful and game-like. For this reason, the project falls into the domain of rule-based dance improvisation at the same time that it satisfies Bourriaud's (2002, 103) criteria for relational art in that "the production of gestures wins out over the production of material things," emphasizing "the production of movement over categories." In contemporary dance history, the approaches of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, from Judson Church in the 1960s and 1970s, come to mind; there, dancers were asked to eschew technique and perform tasks such as moving awkward bed mattresses, walking, standing or speaking, and moving in repeated loops (Banes 1987). Dancers were also combined with non-dancers in happening-style events that were radical because the accepted constructions of both the dance and the dancer were questioned. Contact improvisation, which emerged out of the same era, involved sensing shifts of weight in oneself and others and reacting to the received impulses by listening to how one's body responded, then letting the movement ripple outward to influence the other bodies in the space. If we call attention to the game-like structure of Intui-Tweet, there is a distinct convergence with the ever expanding fields of game studies and game design, as well as with experiments in locative media that frequently use mobile phones' global positioning system (GPS) functions for participants to search for or create narratives. Further related cultural phenomena are the open-ended art practices of artists such as Miranda July that invite participants to follow instructions to create quirky objects or liminal experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Rancière's (2009a, 22) argument that relational aesthetics are characterized by "displacement and despecification of instruments, materials and apparatuses" is particularly applicable to IntuiTweet because both functions were enhanced. We de-specified the moment of improvisation into words spread across countries and time zones, and we displaced bodies from a dance studio. Additional de-specifications of dance once it is situated within the context of social networking are the liberating of this art form from young and virtuosic bodies, from the traditional evaluative gaze of the audi-

ence, and from the economic structures for production and presentation. This political and aesthetic inclusivity is characteristic of the contact improvisation ethos: "Contact Improvisation is an open-ended exploration of the kinesthetic possibilities of bodies moving through contact. Sometimes wild and athletic, sometimes quiet and meditative, it is a form open to all bodies and enquiring minds."<sup>17</sup> The moment of receiving a tweet, sent as SMS and announced by the usual brief phone vibration or chirp, was surprisingly kinesthetic. It felt like a touch, a stroke, or a nudge—effectively, the insertion of another's corporeal experience into my daily life. Despite being displaced from usual improvisatory contexts (the theater, the studio, or even public spaces) and displaced from the other dancing bodies, these messages triggered a range of powerful responses, revealing that networked touch is like the "tact beyond the possible" that Derrida identifies in Nancy's writing on the corpus. How is it possible that our mobile media devices can facilitate such "stroking, striking, thinking, weighing" across a distributed corpus of bodies (Derrida 2005, 66)?

Walking along a path after having emerged from a Boston underground station, I received a tweet from Leena, who was in Oslo: "Fluids passing through my legs, a sense of weight filling wide space, finally. I know I made the right decision." This caused me to experience blurred central vision and to have a strong peripheral focus. The impact was quick and involuntary to the extent that I did not craft a response but let myself shift into a responsive state, as one does when doing contact improvisation. The public path was relatively deserted, so I let myself inject a moment of dance into my more pedestrian movement, and I swerved sideways for a few steps, directly into some bushes. It was like a moment of escape. I sent the following tweet in response after my micro-improvisation: "Fluid legs made me want to walk sideways or at least to waver no more straight lines. Soft peripheral focus makes me a bad pedestrian." The exchange continued after an interval of a few minutes: "Bad pedestrian made go on all fours and crawl which I happily did in the comfort of my kitchen." I received this message while I was driving and, as if I was in the midst of an actual contact improvisation, I had a strong desire to fall on all fours myself. For obvious reasons, I could not physically react, but I was able to nurture a somatic response. I kept this sensation alive during the short drive home, and when I entered my house ten minutes later, I dropped to the floor in my kitchen to continue the improvisation. This ability to let movement responses become latent and then to release them was an unexpected result of the IntuiTweet method. The ebbs and flows of movement exchange were both concrete and immanent

(not quite actualized); the movement was not just separated spatially from the original moment, but it was temporally stretched and distributed across more than one body.

Moments of improvised movement generated by our process varied in intensity—sometimes powerful and almost derailing other actions, and sometimes subtle and insinuating. A tweet arrived, and I just did not know what to do with it. I waited, slept on it, and moved around it and finally my body was comfortable improvising it. A temporal and rhythmic quality that does not exist very well in the studio or in stage performances took root: sustained inertia or protracted stillness. This was an expansion of the hiatus in con-tact, the “-” of con-tact.

My attitude toward my mobile phone shifted through this process. It was imbued with anticipated corporeal potential. Not just a device *in* motion, it became a device *for* motion. The simple sound or vibration of a received tweet, even if not retrieved then and there, could enact a shift in body state. The mobile phone might still be buried in my bag or pocket as I stood on a crowded train platform, but part of me was already aware of movement waiting to be deciphered. I was in a state of anticipation, waiting to receive. I lived in my body differently, as if the body state of the studio was filtered into my daily life. This was a distinct sensory reconfiguration that coincided with being in a state of dance while outwardly shifting very little. This was also an example of lived social aesthetics that freed art from being defined according to canons of representation or dance vocabulary and based it on a form of sensory apprehension. Echoing the earlier discussion on Twitter etiquette, this form of aesthetics is not as much a mode of doing as a mode of being (Rancière 2009a, 29).

The IntuiTweet research has not yet articulated a clear definition of movement intuition—the original research question—but in many respects we obtained a better working definition. I located movement intuition in practice and began to sense subtle variations in improvisatory content: a movement impulse was not quite the same thing as a movement sensation; a movement desire had a different temporality from a movement intuition. Each was distinct but overlapped with the others. None was more primordial, or basic, than the others, but each existed differently as a complex somatic, kinetic, and cognitive assemblage. The working definition offered here is that a movement intuition is understood by sensing what it is *not*: it is not an impulse, a sensation, or a desire. This is a highly unsatisfactory definition by most standards, but it possesses its own sort of fuzzy logic and it is, in a circular way, an intuition of what is an intuition by ruling out

what is not an intuition. It is also not unlike the moment of anesthetic in the aesthetic: distinguished in terms of what it interrupts. The artistic process shifted the research goals and resulted in IntuiTweet being valuable for its contribution to conceptual, corporeal, and methodological knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

### Improvisation as Mode of Social Interaction

I argued earlier that *Small Acts* and IntuiTweet were located in the domain of social aesthetics and that both involved a form of improvisation related to contact improvisation. The con-tact in *Small Acts* was made up of the ebbs and flows of improvisation between the movements of audience members and performers; in IntuiTweet, con-tact was fostered by movement translated into texts and transformed through a distributed network of bodies. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that these improvisation practices can also be seen as models for social interaction and that a particular construction of the body is implicated. Social interaction consists not simply of the material, gestural, and linguistic exchanges in the practice of daily life; it has the wider connotations of creating or re-creating bonds among people and gives rise to “new modes of confrontation or participation” (Rancière 2009a, 21). The improvisation central to social interaction is the crafting, moment by moment, of shared narratives and spaces using the devices of existence available to us: the mechanisms, movements, and media of life. Further, the understanding of improvisation that weaves its way through this chapter is pinned on a particular approach to embodied subjectivity: intercorporeality.

Consistent with the flow of ideas throughout this chapter, here, too, we see how Bourriaud can be used to initiate reflections on improvisation; Rancière, to clarify and ground; and Derrida, to render subtler and more complex. Bourriaud does not explicitly address improvisation but structures art in such a way that improvisation may be read into it. He locates the work of art at a “social interstice,” says it is “a state of encounter,” and indicates that transitivity is a “forever unfinished discursiveness” (Rancière 2009a, 16–18, 26). The bodies engaged in these discursive encounters remain implicit rather than articulated. The redistribution of the forms of sensory experience on which Rancière bases his notion of aesthetics operates through most dance forms, to greater or lesser degrees, but is most evident in contact improvisation. Nancy Stark Smith describes contact as a form of movement “based on the communication between two or more moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical

laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia.” Stark Smith goes on to say that “alertness is developed in order to work in an energetic state of physical disorientation.”<sup>19</sup> It is easy to rhapsodize about fluidity and synchronicity in contact improvisation resulting in a union of intent and motion. Considering instead the inertia and disorientation, gravity and temporality, of movement improvisation we see how touch may be varied, sporadic, and inconsistent but is all the stronger because of these qualities. In other words, we can see the role for the anesthetic in the aesthetic of contact: moments of slippage or waiting, disorientation, or searching. The experiences of *Small Acts* and IntuiTweet reveal how both improvisation and social interactions (particularly through social networking) are less about connections than they are about non-coincidence.

Once this terrain of slippage, inertia, and inconsistency is acknowledged it is valuable to turn once again to Derrida out of respect for the complexity of improvisation. Beginning with the body itself, in his reading of Merleau-Ponty, Derrida (2005, 207–8) reminds us that when my right hand touches my left, it is nothing less than the body of the other that is animated before me. This can mean that I am never fully in control or cognizant of myself, but it can also mean, in a truly networked sense, a certain dispersion of sensing. Any dancer who has performed with other dancers knows that it is as if one’s proprioceptive awareness extends across all other bodies onstage; the others sense for me and with me. In terms that are uncannily relevant to the dispersed, asynchronous contact achieved through IntuiTweet, Derrida emphasizes a non-coincidence of a body with itself that “allows the articulation, conjuncture, or joining *un ajointement* (however inadequate and interruptible) between several heterogeneous sensible experiences” (350). These heterogeneous experiences in dance improvisation are the lives and bodies of the separate dancers but can at the same time be read as the tensions of sensory data and physical motion within one dancing body—impulses, sensations, knowledge, and intuition that pull in different directions within one body. The conjunctions, whether joining several people within a social network over time or joining several senses within one body in a single moment, are always inadequate and interruptible. Derrida reminds us that we are inadequate and un-identical to ourselves.

In addition to being a faithful account of the complexity of improvisation, Derrida’s words are striking for depicting people linked, fallibly and disjointedly, through a technological system that itself is akin to a sensory body. We are deeply non-coincident, inconsistent, and asynchronous. Following the IntuiTweet instructions, the participants received sensory infor-

mation from another heterogeneous sensible being through a distributed and de-spatialized system; this information became meaningful individually and collectively once it was enacted and shared. I suggest that our ability in IntuiTweet to integrate information that was non-identical to ourselves was due to our being deeply disrupted and non-identical within ourselves to begin with. We did not fight this state. We improvised with and through the layers of disruption. In the broad sweep of this project, the tweets with explicit movement information were less significant than the gaps between tweets—how the movement grew or developed quietly or in unexpected bursts, without our controlling or shaping it. This permits a deeper understanding of the anesthetic. It is important to see that it is not simply a binary opposite of the aesthetic but, rather, a field or event space of less consolidated, less determined, less categorizable qualities of social interaction.

Discussions of improvisation in dance do not always include considerations of the social. In improvisation, one exists in the immediacy of the present moment, but that does not mean it is clear, consistent, or context-free. Some dancers feel that improvisation happens in a state of emptiness. Cathérine Kintzler has written eloquently of the paradoxes of the void (*le vide*) in improvisation. She challenges the suggestion that improvisation happens in a clean, almost pure, internal corporeal space. The paradox she identifies is that the improvised dance gesture pulls away from habitual bodily movement to craft new patterns of movement at the same time that it distances itself from transcendental pretensions that actually constrain the body. Consistent with but also extending Rancière, Kintzler writes that this improvisatory act of making a void is one of shattering the immediate authority of the sensible, existing modes of being and expectations.<sup>20</sup> But is it social? In discourses on dance, the question arises as to whether it is possible to improvise alone. Some dancers believe we always improvise alone, and others insist we never do so, even when we are solitary. Nancy can be used to shift the perspective somewhat so we no longer expect a direct answer to the question of whether we improvise alone or not. At stake is not the singular or plural but of a state of betweenness: “The *with*, understood in terms of existence, must therefore be elaborated as a quite particular space—the word *space* being understood here in both the literal sense, since the existents are also bodies, extended beings, and in a figurative sense, which would answer the question: “What takes place between us?”” (Nancy 2008, 119).

IntuiTweet revealed that the dance of daily life takes place between us. The focus and intensity of the engagement that dancers, accustomed to the studio, bring to the crafting of tweets using mobile phones shed light on how

these devices affect and transform our expressive and corporeal behavior beyond the studio. *Small Acts* foregrounded the collective practices of movement, perception, and constructions of narrative of a particular community. Embedded in these examples is a definition of the social that is innately intercorporeal. This follows a basic phenomenological perspective informed by the late writings of Merleau-Ponty in which the relation between people is not construed in terms of the self or identities as much as it is about intercorporeality, a field of multiple embodied exchanges (Diprose 2002; Kozel 2007; Merleau-Ponty 1968). The boundaries between bodies are inherently fluid, and each person is taken to be a multiply sensed incarnate being perpetually engaged in a dance between subject and object, between one being and another. An emphasis on intercorporeality does not eschew politics and the social for, following Merleau-Ponty, perception, agency, and subjectivity in general take place as a body opened up to the bodies of others.

Like the dancers in IntuiTweet, the body is porous: receiving impulses from others, being derailed by others to greater or lesser degrees, and reformulating the traces of others into new transmissions or relations. It is because the body is constituted in relation to others that it is ambiguous, opened to the world and to others, and so can act at all. Rosalyn Diprose explains intercorporeality in Merleau-Ponty based on an understanding of the self as “a lived body ambiguously caught between subject and object” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 69). In other words, I am who I am because you exist. The “I” and “you” lose further distinction in intercorporeality when the Merleau-Pontian relation of reversibility is recognized to occur in the most fundamental sensory engagement with the world. Each of us is already permeated by otherness; even when we touch the world we are touched in return, we see and are seen, we listen as we speak. These ever more fragmentary moments of sliding between being-subject and being-object are how we exist in the world. These are fundamentally improvisational in that I am forever acting *and* responding, without really having a starting point in one or the other modality. These moments are also fundamentally relational.

Returning, at the end of this chapter, to the devices of existence: improvisation is one way to navigate the world. The argument is ontological in that it refers to a state of being in the world; it is experiential in that it refers to concrete sensory engagement with others; and it is haptic in that it is based on touch. We are not left to our own devices as much as we participate in the devising of our worlds. A message we can take from relational aesthetics is that the beginnings of a path, a formula, a game, or a story may be given to us by an artist or a choreographer, but we are expected to take it from there

and improvise. Improvisation, even when it is crisp, fluid, or truly inspired, is still a play across the hiatus of con-tact. To use another set of metaphors, it is messy. It slips and slides; it lingers or ends before it has fully started; it glides in and out of shadow; it gets distracted. It becomes tired and sad and has moments of unruly joy. It spirals off in leaps of fancy. It hurts and needs comfort. The implication of this disruption of space, time, and materiality is that any encounter with otherness in all of its forms—whether another person, a sound, a movement, or an unexpected event—invites a moment of improvisation. Improvisation is a mode of social interaction.

## Notes

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1. This chapter does not contain an explicit account of phenomenology as a methodology. An extensive discussion of this approach to phenomenology, based on the late writings of Merleau-Ponty and not the Husserlian transcendental version, is in Kozel 2007. For related discussions of methodology in relation to research in performance and media, see Kozel 2010a, 2010b.

2. Ben Wright created the original version of *Small Acts* in 2008 as a quintet for stage and live piano for his U.K. company Bgroup. In 2010, Wright reinvented the work for Skånes Dansteater (<http://www.skandesdansteater.com>), dissecting the structure of the original piece and dividing it among thirteen performers and twenty-two areas of the company's building. He inserted new movement material developed collaboratively with Skånes Dansteater's dancers and the score, consisting of several piano miniatures by the British composer Howard Skempton, was recorded and played back over an assortment of loudspeakers. The design of the performance areas was enhanced by Jens Sethzman's temporary light structures, and costumes were designed by Theo Clinkard.

3. “Non-dance” is an appropriately underdefined notion. In dance scholarship, it can be located outside an “exhausted” artform (Lepecki 2006) and in convergences between dance and other art forms, such as circus. In practice, it can take the form of the pared-down, repetitive choreographic work of Jérôme Bel, which is about the frailty of the body rather than the dance (<http://www.jeromebel.fr>), or Ivana Müller's conceptual approach to choreography, by which she produces movement without moving ([www.dance-tech.net](http://www.dance-tech.net)). Non-dance exposes or transcends the borders of conventionally defined dance. Relating to non-dance, I have reflected on the mobile narratives of IntuiTweet as contra-choreography in Kozel 2013.

4. I translate *phénoménalité esthétique* as "aesthetic experience" for simplicity (Derrida 2005, 229).

5. This is very like the argument for the touching-touched in Merleau-Ponty (1968).

6. IntuiTweet was part of a larger initiative called Intuition in Creative Processes, a Helsinki-based collaboration between dance researchers associated with the Theatre Academy (Leena Rouhiaine, Mia Keinänen) and designers from the Media Lab of the University of Arts and Design (Samu Mielonen, Asta Raami). This project was supported by the Academy of Finland.

7. On April Fool's day of 2009, the *Guardian* ironically "reported" that it would cease print publication in favor of disseminating all news via Twitter: RioPalof, "Twitter Switch for Guardian, after 188 Years of Ink," March 31, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/apr/01/guardian-twitter-media-technology>. Twitter is seen as an ego-based exercise on the part of those who think they are "fascinating": Margaret Mason, "Writing My Twitter Etiquette Article: 14 Ways to Use Twitter Politely," August 15, 2008, [http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/the\\_thoughtful\\_user\\_guide/writing\\_my\\_twitter\\_etiquette\\_article\\_14\\_ways\\_to\\_use\\_twitter\\_politely.php](http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/the_thoughtful_user_guide/writing_my_twitter_etiquette_article_14_ways_to_use_twitter_politely.php). Some journalists defend Twitter from accusations of superficiality: Claire Cain Miller, "Putting Twitter's World to Use," April 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/14/technology/internet/14twitter.html?dlbk>.

In the broader context of WikiLeaks, "engagement on social networking sites is frantic but shallow," John Kampfner, "WikiLeaks Turned the Tables on Governments, but the Power Relationship Has Not Changed," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jan/17/wikileaks-governments-journalism?CMP=twtd>.

8. PBworks, "Twitter Fan Wiki," last edited 2010, <http://twitter.pbworks.com/w/page/1779812/Hashtag>. The shift to "What's happening?" occurred in November 2009.

9. Mason, "Writing My Twitter Etiquette Article."

10. The motivation to reveal these attitudes and to push at their edges echoes a social anthropologist's sensitivity to "unspoken assumptions and implicit forms of knowledge and belief" (Born 2005, 14) in combination with an artist's desire to critique and create something new on the basis of this sensitivity.

11. Lindsay Cutler, "Nine Essentials of Twitter Etiquette," *Nerve.com*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.nerve.com/dispatches/cutler/nine-essentials-of-twitter-etiquette>. An additional source, at <http://www.webdoctus.com/2010/01/complete-guide-to-twitter-etiquette>, is no longer accessible.

12. Hilary Moss, "Meghan McCain's Cleavage-Covering Style: Nothing to See Here! (Photos)," *Huffington Post*, March 18, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/19/meghan-mccains-cleavage-c\\_n\\_326308.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/19/meghan-mccains-cleavage-c_n_326308.html).

13. "After a few days of being excoriated for those three sentences dashed off in the middle of a meeting, Trunk addressed the controversy in a new blog post: 'Not only have bloggers written whole posts about the disgustingness of it,

but 70 people unfollowed me, and people actually came to my blog and wrote complaints about the twitter on random, unrelated posts": Tracy Clark-Flory, "Tweeting a Miscarriage," *Salon.com*, September 26, 2009, [http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/feature/2009/09/26/miscarriage\\_tweet](http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/feature/2009/09/26/miscarriage_tweet). It was also picked up by CNN and she was asked why she was being so personal: Jessica Goldberg, "A TMI Tweet about Work, Wisconsin and a Woman's Right to Choose," *TheFrisky.com*, October 1, 2009, <http://www.thefrisky.com/post/246-a-tmi-tweet-about-work-wisconsin-and-a-womans-right-to-choose>.

14. See Jessica Wakeman, "I'm Live-Tweeting My Abortion." *TheFrisky.com*, February 24, 2010, <http://www.thefrisky.com/post/246-im-live-tweeting-my-abortion-on-twitter>. It is worth indicating that it is impossible to assess what percentage of Twitter users made up the vocal community of objectors.

15. This function has been largely disabled in the interests of Twitter supporting smart phones with Wi-Fi access rather than facilitating continued usage by standard mobile phones. This is an unfortunate part of Twitter's business strategy, because it means users without smart phones (the majority of the population) can interface only via their computers, not via their mobile phones.

16. See <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com>. Some of her instructions are, "Feel the news" and "Make a portrait of your friend's desires."

17. From Ray Chung workshop announcement, London, 2009, <http://www.contactquarterly.com/cq/webtext/resource.html> (no longer accessible).

18. "About Contact Improvisation (CI)," *Contact Quarterly*, 2011, <http://www.contactimprov.net/about.html>. For a discussion of the method to emerge from this project, called the Intuitive Imagination method, see Kozel 2010a.

19. Stark Smith speaking for herself and for Steve Paxton's approach to contact improvisation; see "About Contact Improvisation (CI)."

20. Catherine Kintzler, "La danse: L'improvisation et les paradoxes du vide (Première partie)," blog post, 2009, <http://www.mezetulle.net/article-30667877.html>.