

## Contact Improvisation

### Touch and Hidden Political Ideologies

Hwang, Hye-Won\*

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## I. Introduction

Contact improvisation is a partner dance form initiated by Steve Paxton during the early 1970s in the United States. It emphasizes yield, weight, on-going flow of energy and the physical sensations of touching, leaning, supporting, counterbalancing and falling with other people.<sup>1)</sup> In Korean dance scholarship, studies on contact improvisation mostly have examined the principles and characteristics of the form. Korean scholars have tended to interpret the essence of contact improvisation as an approach to substance, as process itself, or as energy shifts between yin and yang<sup>2)</sup> whereas authors in similar studies conducted in the west argue that the goal of contact improvisation is to experience a creative, spontaneous, and experimental process.<sup>3)</sup> Both Korean and western scholars celebrate the way contact improvisation helps dancers break up the form of traditional dance movements and liberate themselves from making a polished work.

\* Assistant Professor of Practice, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, hyewonhwang@unl.edu

- 1) Novack, Cynthia (1990). *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- 2) Park, Eunhwa (2005). Contact Improvisation – Approach to Substance. *The Korean Journal of Dance Studies*, 16: 81-109; Ahn, Shinhee (2011). The Character of Yin Yang and Chi in Contact Improvisation. *The Korean Journal of Dance Studies*, 34: 161-189; Lee, Na-Hyun and Kim, Malborg (2015). An Analysis of Contact Improvisation as Rhizome. *The Korean Journal of Dance Studies*, 52(1): 69-83.
- 3) Carter, Curtis L. (2000). Improvisation in Dance. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58(2): 181-190; Dworin, Judith (2005). Improvising in Performance. *Contact Quarterly*, 30(1): 34; Smith, Nancy S (2006). Harvest: One History of Contact Improvisation. *Contact Quarterly*, 31(2): 46-54.

As a dancer with ballet and modern dance training background, I took contact improvisation classes and workshops for many years. Based on my experience in contact improvisation, I share the views of the Korean and western studies mentioned above. During classes, I found myself focusing on my connection with the ground, with gravity and feeling the moment in time and space. The process of contact improvisation enabled me to concentrate on each moment, rather than worrying too much about making a complete piece. When I danced with others, I sensed the on-going flow of energy and weight being shared through points of contact with the other dancers in that moment. However, the more I experienced this in varied settings – in “jam” format and in theatrical performances – the more I became aware of issues related to the practice. For example, I could not be always experimental and spontaneous when I performed contact improvisation with other dancers. There should be a loose plan, but often we had to set “fixed” plans so that we anticipated what would come next. Also, I noticed social and political issues associated with contact improvisation, particularly with regard to “touch.” There were moments I did not feel comfortable in physical interactions with others. It took me a while to make sure I was “safe” in order to go deep into “felt experience.” To do that, I had to control aspects of my bodily sensations using technique and professionalism to curb the sensuality or “erotic moment” in the dance.

In *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, dance ethnographer Cynthia Novack notes, “Steve Paxton’s association of touch with biomechanics and gravity ideologically separated the dance form from direct psychological and sexual encounter.”<sup>4)</sup> Novack’s statement implies that contact improvisation requires tremendous practice and skill to avoid crossover sexual experience from the physical sensations of touch and weight. Her assertion on desexualizing contact improvisation through technique provoked me to think about what remains in terms of ideology to repress the sexual signification in contact improvisation. In her article, “Mobilizing (in) the Archive: Santee Smith’s Kaha:wi,” Jacqueline Shea Murphy discusses how current practice of modern dance tries not to recognize sexuality.<sup>5)</sup> Similarly, I am interested in the relationship between political ideologies embedded in the practice of contact improvisation and the avoidance, through skilled technique of touch, of its sexual aspects.

The aim of this paper is to delve into what kinds of political ideologies are hidden behind attempts to desexualize contact improvisation. I am aware that issues of sexuality will appear differently in jam versus performance formats, and also will vary according to gender pairings. To limit my study, I will focus on male-male performance contact improvisation. My choice of the male-male pairings is motivated by the negative perceptions of homosexuality that exist in both Korean and western

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4) C. Novack(1990), *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), p.166.

5) J. Shea Murphy(2009), Mobilizing (in) the Archive: Santee Smith’s Kaha:wi, in *Worlding Dance*(New York: Palgrave MacMillan), pp.32-52.

cultures, where the intimate touch between males in public has been taboo and controversial. I am curious to see how male dancers conduct their physical interactions in contact improvisation performances, whether they avoid the issue of (homo)sexuality and how. I have chosen an all-male dance video clip from the *Making Contact* series with dancers Andrew Harwood, David Corbet and Jacob Lehrer.<sup>6)</sup> The video was made in 2006 with live music played by Rae Howell and Alies Sluiter and filmed by Dianne Reid. I will describe three separate sections from the video that demonstrate intense touching in close proximity.

I admit the analysis is based solely on my own interpretation, and that my discussion of why the issue of sexuality in contact improvisation is often repressed is limited because it does not analyze female-male or all-female interactions. I want to make it clear that the purpose of my study is not to make a generalized conclusion about the whole genre of contact improvisation from one video clip. Instead, using this clip as an example, I hope to illustrate that the masculine qualities emphasized in the male dancers' contact improvisation performances and the political ideology of patriarchy are linked, and that the avoidance of the sensual and erotic mood in physical interactions between the male dancers relates to an underlying ideology of heteronormativity embedded in the practice of contact improvisation. By showing examples of these linkages, I hope my study will ignite more conversations about the issue of sexuality in contact improvisation that will incorporate other examples and more varied settings.

## II. The Representation of Masculinity and Patriarchal Ideology

In near darkness, there is electronic sound in a low key—same tone and same bit. Two dancers come out from the corner. One has his hair in a ponytail and wears white top and black loose pants (hereafter performer A); the other who wears black top and white loose pants (hereafter performer B). Both have bare feet. Keeping a close proximity, in a fast pace, the two men walk side to side crossing each other as if they are surveying one another before a fight. They stretch their right arms and catch each other's hand and pull themselves together aggressively. Counterbalancing. Using momentum, performer B jumps into performer A's side and immediately lands on the floor as if performer B has beaten him over. Still holding each other's hands, but extending their arms fully so that they keep a distance, one person turns a half circle while the other person becomes an axis and vice versa. Performer B lets go of

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6) Lehrer and Corbet are Australian, and Harwood is from Canada. All three of the performers also serve as director, choreographer and teacher, and have extensively practiced contact improvisation for a number of years. For more information about the dancers, please see <<http://artsalive.ca/en/dan/meet/bios/artistDetail.asp?artistID=106>>, <<http://www.strutdance.org.au/artists/david-corbet>>, and <<http://www.strutdance.org.au/artists/jacob-lehrer>>.

performer A's hand and runs away from him, but is chased by his counterpart. Performer B jumps into performer A's side again. This time performer A catches him in one arm. Performer A turns around, holding performer B, then puts him down on the floor as if he is the winner of this game. As performer A runs away from performer B, performer B catches performer A's right wrist with both his arms. At the same time, performer A pulls his arm into his chest and pushes away performer B hostilely. Performer B can't help but be pushed away. Next they appear to part from one another toward the opposite diagonal, but shortly after walk to the center as if to have a second round of the fight. While performer A keeps walking, performer B pauses. Performer B pauses for one second bending his knees and bringing both arms and torso forward like the posture of a boxer. He then jumps into performer A's side again. Performer A catches performer B with one arm and immediately presses him down to the floor. They stand up and walk towards the corner together. Performer B opens up his arms side to side and bulges his chest, tilting his head backward so his face looks up to the ceiling. At the same time, performer A seems to embrace performer B's upper body. However, it immediately turns out that performer A drags performer B harshly. Suddenly, performer B stands up and lifts performer A to the air. They repeat the same phrases, drawing a big circle until they finally come back to the spot where they started.

From one motion to another, the men always use a momentum. The motion continues with flow. They keep close proximity throughout the dance, sharing weight and touching. The movement quality is, however, strong and controlling, in a quick tempo, so that the shared touch appears as if they are fighting rather than being anything sexual or sensual in nature. As a whole, this section evokes a mood of playfulness and aggressiveness, showing dominant representations of masculinity.

In *Sharing the Dance*, Novack compares contact improvisation with ballet in terms of heterosexual gender norms. She states,

A man and a woman always dance the ballet duet, the pas de deux, establishing heterosexuality as the norm, particularly because the encounter most often refers to romantic love... The contact improvisation duet, on the other hand, may take place between a man and a woman, two women, or two men, and it does not attempt to represent romantic love or any other narrative content. The dance form has no gendered codification of movement vocabulary; the vocabulary that exists (such as rolling, falling, counterbalancing) is available for both men and women.<sup>7)</sup>

I share with Novack's opinion that duet in ballet is commonly performed by a man and woman, showing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity for men and women. The homosexual interactions are often downplayed in ballet. I also agree with Novack that the sexual division of labor in movement characteristics in contact improvisation is more flexible than it is in ballet. However, she does not talk

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7) Novack(1990), pp.125-128.

about the quality of movement performed by men in contact improvisation and how it is still bounded into the conservative ideas of masculinity. Ramsay Burt discusses this matter in *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*. He states,

Contact improvisation has, in some ways, expanded the ways in which the male dancer can appear on stage, but the male contact dancer can sometimes appear strong, dynamic, powerful and controlling- qualities that support, and conform to, conservative notions of masculine identity.<sup>8)</sup>

Burt's discussion points out that contact improvisation tends to support hetero-normative sexual morality and gender roles. I wonder if this is related to a homophobic fear. What is politically informed if the representation of masculinity by male dancers is practiced in contact improvisation? In the same book, Burt states, "It is generally argued that homophobia is a mechanism for regulating the behaviour of all men rather than just self-identified homosexuals. It has been proposed that homophobia is an essential characteristic of patriarchal society."<sup>9)</sup> In *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Elizabeth Grosz, who analyzes Lacan's theory, states "The relationship between the penis and phallus is not arbitrary, but socially and politically motivated" by the "existing structure of patriarchal power."<sup>10)</sup> Here, the phallus is only linguistically and socially constructed, and the phallogentric idea acts as a program or system that operates patriarchal value and power. The controlling, strong, and aggressive quality performed by male dancers in this section suggests that this dance piece does not challenge, but conforms to conservative notions of masculine identity buttressed by predominant heterosexual and patriarchal ideologies in western society.

### III. Hetero-normative Sexual Morality and the Male Bonding of Philia

With the same tone of light, the music changes from unvaried electronic sound to a violin sound with a xylophone. Two male dancers face each other without having direct eye contact. The proximity of the two dancers is about one foot. Performer B lowers his body to slide his head from performer A's knee to the armpit very quickly while performer A lifts both his arms to the ceiling. Performer B then lifts performer A, so that the latter's body is parallel to the floor. Performer B spins performer A, then puts him on the floor on his head. I see performer A's smoothly roll, head to spine to pelvis, to the floor. Using the momentum from lowering his body to the floor, he rolls up to standing. Performer B

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8) R. Burt(1995), *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*(London: Routledge), p.148.

9) Ibid., p.23.

10) E. Grosz(1990). Sexual Relations, in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*(London: Routledge), p.124.

has been waiting behind him until performer A is standing. Performer B jumps off from performer A, and performer A approaches performer B. This time performer B lowers his body to lift performer A onto his back; when performer A leans forward his torso on performer B's back he embraces performer B's torso with one of his arms. After performer B shifts performer A's weight from one space to another, performer A embraces performer B's torso in order to shift performer B's body from one place to another. They keep alternating between lifting and shifting weight, to being lifted and being shifted. They make contact with one another's head, back, torso, shoulders, thighs, arms and hands. The dancers show tremendous strength and power in holding each other's body weight. The dynamic between two dancers is supportive rather than aggressive. The flow of movement from one to another is continuous without any interruption. As I watch their movement, I breathe with them feeling the momentum that they create.

In this section, two male dancers hardly make any eye contact. Their facial expressions are stoic, emotionless. Meanwhile, the communication between two dancers is reciprocal. One does not dominate the other. They are continuously shifting their roles. Both are active and passive in their turn. As I perceive the movement dialogue between the two male dancers, despite their equal power dynamic, there are some moments that the movement quality in their physical contact oscillates between erotic feeling and a game-like feeling. This section certainly elicits some socio-sexual interactions between men. However, the socio-sexual interactions have been coded into technique, drawing a boundary with sexual encounter. The duration of the moment is too short to feel fully the erotic side implicit in it. Perhaps, the dancers maintain the fast-pace movement without looking at each other directly in order to evoke the mood of severity, instead of affection or eroticism. The dynamic as a whole – the fast-pace, the alternating role of lifting and being lifted, emotionless facial expression, and absence of hierarchical power or dominance between two male dancers – reminds me of Michel Foucault's discussion of *philia*, or friendship.

In *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces back to Greek thought in order to discuss the idea of male bonding as an ideal power relationship. He discusses the ideal relationship of male bonding as the bond of love between men that evolves into a relation of friendship without changing their relationship into “erotics.” Foucault writes, “Between the man and the boy, there is not – there cannot and should not be – a community of pleasure.”<sup>11)</sup> Foucault further discusses the problematization of a boy passively being an object of pleasure to another. Foucault states,

The boy was not supposed to experience a physical pleasure; he was not even supposed quite to take pleasure in the man's pleasure; he was supposed to feel pleased about giving pleasure to the

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11) M. Foucault(1990), *Erotics, In History of Sexuality Volume 2: Use of Pleasure*(New York: Vintage), p.223.

other, provided he yielded when he should – that is, not too hastily, nor too reluctantly either... So that the sexual act, in the relation between a man and a boy, needed to be taken up in a game of refusals, evasions, and escapes that tended to postpone it as long as possible,<sup>12)</sup>

Foucault's statement indicates that the male bonding of *philia* does not go beyond the socially constructed sexual ethics. The idea of *philia* – friendship – that promotes the reciprocal independence as well as an equal power relation between the two men supports heterosexuality as a norm.

Here again, contact improvisation between the two male dancers in this section demonstrates the movement qualities of seriousness and equal power. Their tendency to eliminate the sexual and erotic mood through those qualities seems to elude the criticism about male dancers' physical interactions from the perspective of hetero-normative sexual morality.

#### **IV. The Intimate Touch between Male Dancers and Heteronormativity**

The music continues with a violin and a xylophone. On stage stand two dancers. One has hair in a ponytail (performer A), the other has curly hair and is wearing a black top and loose blue pants (hereafter, performer C). The two dancers stand almost side by side, making contact along their torsos. Each stretches his right arm to the right side, making contact with their hands together. They move their arms together gently inscribing a half circle in the air. Performer C catches performer A's neck with his elbow while performer A lets go of his weight and falls into the other man's elbow. Maintaining that position, the two men look at each other from a close distance for a moment. Keeping the eye contact, they sit on the floor still maintaining their bodies in contact. Performer A rolls down to the floor; immediately performer C rolls over performer A's body. Their bodily contact is so tight that their movement phrase looks like a chain. There is a moment in which performer C lies on the floor facing the ceiling. Performer A pushes performer C's left hipbone with his right hand and climbs up on top of the front of the other man's body. The lower halves of their bodies meet and mirror one another creating an erotic moment. Soon performer C pushes performer A's chest and they separate from one another for the first time in the dance. Performer C jumps onto performer A's back while the latter man is in a squat position. Performer A stands up and walks around the space taking on the other man's weight as if he were a cross to bear. They make contact along each other's backs, clasping their arms. Performer A then puts the other man on the floor and they start again to move, contacting, pushing, pulling, counterbalancing, lifting, and falling into each other using their heads, knees, feet, elbows, and backs. The space between the two dancers is intimate. They hardly part from one another

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12) Ibid., p.224.

for more than three feet, and they maintain contact with each other through one part of the body.

While the two dancers are moving around the space using various modes of contact, performer B enters with a door-size frame that is covered with gauze, holding up it high. Performer B approaches the other dancers and walks around them, but is keeping a distance. Meanwhile, the two intimate dancers continue moving in close proximity with varying bodily contact. Finally, the frame is used. While performer C lifts performer A on his shoulders, performer B covers the frame on top of performer A's body. Performer A lands on the floor slowly. Performer B disappears. Only two dancers are on stage again, trapped in the frame which has a bar in the middle of it. They slowly go to the floor and crouch their bodies inside the frame. Each performer looks as if he is confined in a cell, unable to make contact anymore. Both crawl for a while as if they search for a way out, but ultimately pause their motion within the frame. The music and lights fade out.

Watching this section several times, I experienced a range of visceral sensations and emotions. I enjoyed the way male dancers used momentum and counterbalance, and dynamics of speed and fluidity. I was amazed by variety in the methods of weight-sharing and keeping continuous bodily contact through different body parts without separating from each other. At the same time, there were moments in which I realized that my body became tense, when I had perceived sexual and erotic ideas coming from their contact improvisation. In moments during which the two male dancers made eye contact within close proximity or when they touched the body parts seen as intimate – like the hip, neck, and groin – in a slow tempo. However, the moment of sexual and erotic feeling did not last for long since the dancers generally moved at a fast tempo, transmitting their movement from one to another quickly. Additionally, the erotic moments were diluted by my own kinesthetic experience of dance, which allowed me to anticipate the next movement that the dancers would perform. I saw that when a potentially erotic moment was about to be evoked, the dancers either pushed away, averted their head to avoid making eye contact, or sped up their movement phrases. Ann Cooper Albright discusses how dancers cope with physical risk in relation to touch. In her book, *Mining the Dancefield: Feminist Theory and Contemporary Dance*, she states:

Touch, the point of contact, sets up the meeting ground for the duet. In this improvisational dancing the messages of “Give me more weight,” “That’s enough,” “Come on, let’s get moving,” or “I’m going to give you all of my weight,” are communicated through physical contact rather than the dancers’ eyes of a predetermined score. Because contact often includes physical risk, there is a need to keep concentrating on the physical implications of each moment. In this respect, different parts of the body are treated as equally available conduits for the various message of willfulness or shared responsibility. That fact that this intimate physical contact is public allows for moments in which a socially defined sexual or maternal embrace will be acknowledged with a sigh or a smile, and then will easily disappear within more dancing.<sup>13)</sup>



Albright's comment implies that it is recognized within the discipline that dancers deal with the physical and emotional risks of touch that are socially taboo in western culture. In *Touch Revolution: Giving Dance*, Karen Nelson similarly argues that contact improvisation can be seen as a touch revolution. Nelson states, "Contact users are revolutionaries. We train in the arts of touching the floor and of uniting with the forces of the Earth... We learn to take nurturing touch. We learn to allow our bodies to be supported... We learn to give the center of our weight to another human. We decided to open ourselves through curiosity, sensuality, emotionality, physicality."<sup>14</sup> Both Albright and Nelson contend that there is a need that we learn to trust each other while we touch and dance simultaneously with each other, but while not necessarily falling into the sexual sensations in the dance itself.

The end of the aforementioned section of the dance, when two men are trapped inside the frame as if they are confined in each cell, looks appropriately symbolic to me. The frame that breaks two men's ability to make contact is a symbol of heterosexism. The frame speaks the dominant phrase in sex and gender politics: "No touching between men!" The scene articulates that homosexual interaction has obstacles under the hegemony of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, in their article "Sex in Public, emphasize that heteronormativity and heterosexuality are practiced and normalized as privileging hegemony. The article states:

A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness – embedded in things and not just in sex – is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians.<sup>15</sup>

Berlant and Warner's argument suggests that a contact improvisation performance in public might not be totally freed from the dominant ideology in western society where the hetero-relationship is strongly privileged. In the same vein, the promotion of contact improvisation as an unsexual aesthetic practice shows similarly strong degree of influence by a dominant heteronormative political ideology.

## V. Conclusion

I discussed what hidden ideologies exist in contact improvisation with regard to desexualizing the form. Based on my own experience and observation of contact improvisation by male dancers in the

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13) A.C. Albright(1991), *Mining the Dancefield: Feminist Theory and Contemporary Dance*(Michigan: UMI), p.18.

14) K. Nelson(1996), *Touch Revolution: Giving Dance*, *Contact Quarterly* 21(1), p.65.

15) L. Berlant and M. Warner(1998), *Sex in Public*, *Critical Inquiry* 24(2), p.554.

excerpted video clip from the Making Contact series, I noticed that it is education, discipline, or technique through which one is forced to repress the sexual aspect of shared touch experienced during contact improvisation. In the different sections of the dance, there were moments the male dancers had tight physical contacts in close proximity to one another. From the third person's perspective, those moments could be read as sexual and erotic. However, the touch between the male dancers was skillfully executed, and by means of emphasis of masculine qualities as well as the avoidance of direct eye contact, fast-pace movement, and the mood of seriousness, those instances of physical contact or potential intimacy between the male dancers did not appear overtly sexual. The dancers' elective methods of execution and highly trained technique of touch repressed the sexual aspect of their physical contact. This suggests that sexual morality in contact improvisation cannot be seen as free from hetero-normative sexual and patriarchal gender norms. The piece I analyzed shows that the practice of contact improvisation is equally inseparable from a political realm. Furthermore, my physical response to the piece – the experience of tenseness associated with intimate touch between the two male dancers but not noticeable during the aggressive or game-like sequences – makes me realize that my perspective on sexual and gender morality also is not free from hetero-normative sexual norms. It is rather deeply trained and shaped by them.

I want to reiterate that my study does not seek to generalize, and not all the contact improvisation practices and performances repress the sexual or intimate aspects of touch. I acknowledge that the level of the physical and emotional risks involved with touch in contact improvisation might be differently interpreted in male-female, all-female and all-male interactions. I also am open to other interpretations of this piece, since other viewers might respond to intimate physical contacts between male dancers seen in my chosen sections differently. Thus, I want to conclude my paper by stating that there is a need for further studies with different cases to discuss the issue of sexuality with regard to touch in contact improvisation.

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## 접촉 즉흥: 접촉과 숨겨진 정치적 이데올로기

황 헤 원

조교수, 네브라스카-링컨 대학교

저자는 접촉 즉흥에서 나타나는 접촉과 무용수들이 테그닉을 통해 성적인 면이 접촉 행위에서 부각되지 않게 하는 관계성에 의구심을 던진다. 그리하여 이 글의 목적은 접촉 즉흥을 탈성화(desexualizing)하는 것 뒤에 숨겨져 있는 정치적 이데올로기들이 무엇인가를 알아보는 데에 있다. 특히 남성 무용수들 사이에서 이루어지는 접촉 무용 중에 이뤄지는 그들의 접촉 행위를 이 글의 주요 분석과 논의의 대상으로 두는데, 이는 그동안 사회에서 남자들의 접촉에 대해 가장 금기시 해왔기에 더욱 흥미롭다고 본다. 이를 위해, Making Contact라는 시리즈에서 발췌한 비디오 클립을 분석하여 남성 무용수들 사이에서 어떻게 접촉이 이루어지고 있는지, 접촉 행위가 사회적으로 논란이 되는 동성애적인 이슈를 피하고 있는지, 만약 그렇다면 어떤 방법을 통해 그 이슈를 회피하려 하는가를 알아보고자 한다. 무용학과 여성학에서 발췌한 이론들을 바탕으로 저자는 비디오 분석에서 나타난 점 - 사내다운 면을 강조하고, 직접적인 눈맞춤을 피하며, 빠른 움직임 부각하는 - 이 그들의 접촉 행위에서 읽힐 수 있는 성적인 면을 희석시키는 테크닉이라고 제시한다. 이러한 분석을 통해 이 연구는 이성애적이고 가부장적인 젠더의 규범이 이 작품에 나타난 접촉 즉흥 실천에도 영향을 미치고 있음을 밝히고자 한다.

키워드: 접촉 즉흥 (Contact improvisation), 접촉 (Touch), 테크닉 (Technique), 성 (Sexuality), 이성애규범성 (Heteronormativity)