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Romain Bigé

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current issue ▶

back issues ▶

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CQ Unbound ▶

2017

2016

2015

2014

2013

2012

2011

2010

2009

2008

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submissions

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advertising ▶

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"Weight falls through our bones." From *RAPIDS: Visions for Body-Mind Centering*®, 1986. Photos and text © Ziji Beth Goren

Tonic Space

Steps toward an aesthetics of weight in Contact Improvisation

by Romain Bigé

Human animals live in herds, they are bipedal and without feathers. This definition of humanity, one of the first in the history of philosophy, was given by Plato in *The Politics* (380 BC).¹ When Diogenes the Cynical heard of this definition, he decided to pluck a chicken and throw it in the face of Plato's students: "Here's man according to Plato!"² As a dedicated logician, Plato recognized his mistake, and extended the definition accordingly: "Human animals live in herds, they are bipedal, without feathers *and without spurs.*"

This famous inside joke aside, there is something profound in Plato's definition. Instead of defining the anthropological specificity through an intellectual faculty (language, reason, or thought), as became customary in following centuries, Plato was defining humans according to their way of moving: humans are those strange animals that can walk on the ground (bipedal), but that can't reach the sky (without feathers). Plato's definition ceases to be jocular when we grasp that it points to this paradox: humans are upright beings, which means they take their distance from the earth, and yet, in their verticality, they never escape gravity. This is the weight paradox: being human is being suspended between two poles—rising and sinking along the same vertical axis. This dialogue with gravity defines our vertical mode of existence, whether we stand on our two feet, or on our *ischia* when we're sitting, or on our *atlas* when we lift our head while lying down (even paralyzed on my hospital bed, if I'm able, I will lift my head above my spine, and if I can't, caregivers will support my head with pillows). Standing is never quite certain: if it's true that I can hardly sleep standing up, it's also true that I can hardly stand if I am asleep.³ Standing requires a minimal vigilance—for the featherless bipedal beings that we are, the upright posture is far from being a given: it's a constant task of our waking state.

In this article, I would like to show how Contact Improvisation (CI) illuminates this uniquely human trait: our vertical posture and its consequence on human movement potential. CI focuses on a perceptual apparatus often silenced in post-industrial societies: our sense of weight. The idea of sensing weight is—of course—not new in the history of dance. Heinrich von Kleist, in his short story *On the marionette theater* (1810), talked about the "center of gravity" of the dancers. His argument was that the good dancer is able to bring his focus and senses into the center of gravity of his movements, while the bad dancer is captive of the gaze of the audience, and focuses where people seem to be looking at him.⁴ The ability to attend to the way weight is balanced in the body is thus defined by Kleist as the true art of the dancer. But it's only a century later that choreographers actually seized this concept as a core parameter for creating dance. As Merce Cunningham once remarked, "one of the best discoveries the modern dance has made use of is the gravity of the body in weight, that is, as opposite from denying

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Romain Bigé is a philosophy teacher, dancer, and dance scholar based in Paris. He curated and co-edited with Lisa Nelson *CQ's Folio 2: Contact/ Dance Improvisation and Philosophical Thinking*, vol. 42.2, Summer/Fall 2017. A professor agrégé of philosophy and a Fulbright fellow (2017), he is currently preparing a PhD in the École Normale supérieure, drafting a *Philosophy of Gestures* on the poetics of Contact Improvisation and the philosophy of movement. He enjoys rolling on the ground and jumping in the air. cargocollective.com/sharingmovement

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(and thus affirming) gravity by ascent into the air, the weight of the body in going with gravity, down.⁵ This discovery is thus that the weight can not only be an object of attention for the dancer; it can be displaced or modulated.⁶ Which means, for instance, that the dancer can paradoxically *jump downward*: she can send the weight of her body upward, while focusing on the weight of her body that's going downward. This contradictory appearance is what Cunningham called "the awkwardness in movement"⁷ and it was one of the qualities he was actively looking for.

These stylistic alternatives, between Kleist's conception of dancing as the agreement between center of gravity and movement, and Cunningham's conception of choreography as a research into awkwardness in movement, bring modulation of weight to the foreground. And this asks for a further elucidation: How can we describe the experience of weight? What are the perceptual systems that we (humans, animals) use to sense and modify our balance of weight? The physiology related to the experience of weight is widely documented ever since the discovery of the "muscular sense" in the beginning of the 19th century in the works of Charles Bell.⁸ But the most extensive overviews of weight as a correlate of a specific perceptual system were first published in the 20th century,⁹ most notably because of the development of aeronautics and the necessity to understand our basic orienting systems (to help aviators defy the laws of locomotion in which their sense of weight had been selected by evolution).

James Jerome Gibson¹⁰ was one of the prominent researchers in that field, and his findings on the orienting (vestibular, tactile, visual, and kinesthetic) systems deeply influenced physiology—his idea being that the orienting/-exploratory system gives the ground on which all other perceptions appear. A few years after Gibson's forays into weight perception, Contact Improvisation was being developed, and early practitioners, like Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson, noted echoes of his findings in the interior techniques they were developing. One in particular is Paxton's "Small Dance," a meditation aimed at perceiving shifts of weight while remaining in a standing posture ("The Stand").

"... Upward force of the bones. Shoulder blades fall down the back. Relax the intestines into the bowl of the pelvis... In the direction the arms are hanging, without changing that direction, do the smallest stretch you can still feel. Can it be smaller? Can you do less? The initiation of the stretch, along the length of bones, in the direction the force is already going. The small dance – you're relaxing and it's holding you up."

—Steve Paxton, "Transcript" [of a 1977 class] (CQ vol. 11.1, 1986), p. 49

In these instructions, Paxton invites his students to experience the small dance of standing, calling their attention to the micro postural adjustments that maintain the upright posture. The paradoxical instruction of holding oneself up and relaxing at the same time opens to the experience of the fluctuation of tone as an underlying activity. "It's background movement static (...) that you blot out with your more interesting activities, yet it's always there sustaining you."¹¹ In other words: if one wants to relate to the experience of weight in posture, one needs to extract it from the volitional layer that superimposes on this background that supports us. Psychologist and phenomenologist Erwin Straus, in a text on "The Upright Posture" (1950), similarly defined the upright posture as a task we constantly need to sustain: "while the heart continues to beat, from its fetal beginning to death, without our active intervention, and while breathing neither demands nor tolerates our voluntary interference beyond narrow limits, upright posture remains a task throughout our lives."¹² Despite its appearance as a self-sustained posture, maintaining oneself upright requires a minimal vigilance that never rests. The meditative practice that is the Small Dance has this function: to open up the door of perception to the vigilance implied in the upright posture; more than a place of rest, it's a state of preparation for the more athletic movements that might ensue in the practice of Contact Improvisation. But there is more to standing than the Small Dance:

"Imagine, but don't do it, imagine that you are about to take a step forward with your left foot. What is the difference? As you were. Imagine... (repeat). Imagine that you are about to take a step with your right foot. Your left. Right. Left. Standing."

—Steve Paxton, "Drafting Interior Techniques," (CQ, vol. 18.1, Winter/Spring 1993, p. 62.)

Paxton invites the dancers to observe the effects of intentions on their postural dynamics. What happens is that when I imagine a step forward with my right leg, the weight of the body is, ever so slightly, displaced onto the left leg, liberating the right for the possibility of movement. Spanish-French psychologist Julian de Ajuriaguerra¹³ called this ability of the body to organize itself to support its own movements "the tonic function:" it is our way to negotiate with gravity to maintain our posture in spite of the myriad of disequilibriums perception and movement constantly create. French Rolfer and movement analyst Hubert Godard¹⁴ says that this tonic function is like the *ground* from which movement distinguishes itself as a *figure*: without this ground, the figure is meaningless; and furthermore, changing the ground (modulating tone) is tantamount to changing the figure. Thus, the same movement of extending my arm, for instance, differs completely in appearance and meaning if my shoulders are lowered and my head gazes down than if I am sticking out my chest with my head resting upright on my shoulders.

My way to "hold myself up" is not without affects: my ability to give my weight to my right leg, and more specifically, the way this weight will find its balance on the soles of my feet, is highly individual. It relies on my history as a mover, what made and makes me feel comfortable, what kind of attitude I have toward the world and its regions (behind me, above me, in front of me, all around me), now and throughout my life. The study of the tonic function in the Small Dance allows for a seizing of this very individual style each dancer has learned to make the weight circulate in herself. Learning how I stand is never fully separable from learning what I stand by, that is: a set of values that are distributed into the space of movements that I am afforded to make.



Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith in Freelance Dance's *Raft* (1980). (behind, from LT to RT: Lisa Nelson, Daniel Lepkoff, and Christina Svane. Photograph © Stephen Petegorsky.

But why is this learning necessary as a prelude to a Contact encounter with other dancers? Following Paxton's lapidary statement: because "[in Contact Improvisation,] the dancer's weight is only his to give; not to possess."¹⁵ Indeed, if my desire is to release my weight into my partner's body, it becomes a matter of urgency that I teach myself to be nomadic with my supports.¹⁶ This is one of the skills cultivated in the Stand. How can I vary the fields of support while I move? How can I extend my abilities to give weight spherically? It is my habit, as an urban mover, to liberate the weight of my leg only to give it to the front or back space; it is my training, as a Contact Improviser, to liberate any part of my body to give it to any part of my kinesphere, wherever my partner lies. In CI, this space where weight can be given is a space where a free fall is permitted: a space where jumping, diving, and ultimately flying (an inverted fall) have room, where weight is unblocked. It is very tangible: a partner can share it and a spectator can perceive it. It's a space of affordances of the body, which makes visible the question: where can I jump on my partner? Where will she be able to receive my weight? Where can he pour his weight? Or where is he holding weight, not allowing the weight to fall?

This idea of a spherical space of potentials around the dancer is not new. In 1930, German psychologist and philosopher Erwin Straus argued that dance had specific "Forms of Spatiality."¹⁷ Straus's line of argument may seem, to our contemporary eyes, quite archaic: his idea is that this space can only be created by music, or more precisely, that when dance is deprived of musical accompaniment, "it loses the space that is idiomatic for dance."¹⁸ His view was affirmed by being a spectator to the then new *Ausdruckstanz*, the German cousin of America's nascent modern dance. He thought this dance had no future as such, and dance writers have often pointed to Straus's lack of historical nose, as the ensuing decades of dance as a theater art have affirmed the intuition of the German Expressionist dancers: movement has its own logic, and can be explored for the sensations it brings independent of a musical environment.

Despite this obvious lack of historical perspective, I would like to try and make sense of Straus's proposition. What does he mean exactly by "music" when he states that dance without music loses its ground? Contrary to what one might expect, he doesn't mean classical or popular music, nor does he mean a certain type of rhythm or a certain type of sound. What he means is a specific acoustic experience which he names "tonal experience" and which can be found in all the above mentioned "musics"—plus other cases. Tonal experience can be distinguished from common sonic experiences, which consist of having the experience of something as a sound *situated* in space:

I hear the sound of a car outside, I hear a voice behind me. On the contrary, tonal experience corresponds to certain activities, or certain ways of responding to sound: when I let myself be carried by the sound, when I am immersed in it without trying to ascertain where it comes from. Tonal experience is thus a "non-directional" acoustic experience where sounds "approach us, come to us, and, surrounding us, drift on; they fill space, shaping themselves in temporal sequences."¹⁹ For Straus, this is what we experience when we dance to music: we let ourselves be enveloped by its tone.

What is of interest to us here is that this enveloping, homogenizing, all-encompassing experience of tone is expressed as a relaxation of the sphere of movements that are afforded to us—Hubert Godard calls this sphere the "gestosphere," that is, the emotional and symbolic significance of our potential gestures, defined by our individual histories.²⁰ This is especially the case with the back space, which is

experienced in a wholly different manner in urban-pedestrian spheres than in dancing spaces. In the space of pedestrian walking, going backward is often felt as strange, and often requires that we turn our heads in the direction we're going to check for obstacles, even if we know that there are none. In a dance context, this back space relaxes or is at least equated to the forward space: in ballroom dance for instance, going backward is not felt like falling into a dangerous area (in part because there is always one partner who is facing forward and guiding the one going backwards, but also because there is an agreement that backwards is a meaningful, habitual movement); in Contact Improvisation, the demand for spherical vigilance to the surroundings—peripheral vision—widens from the frontal gazing of pedestrian walk. Straus analyzed phenomena such as spinning, turning, and jumping to conclude that "dance movement *fills* space in all directions."²¹

Now, how is this sphere of vigilance connected to the tonal experience of music? Straus argues that they are homologous, or rather that one lays the ground for the other. As the tonal experience is one of being affected from every side of the room by sound, the simultaneous movements of the dancer are potentially expanded to every direction in space.

That music contributes to the creation of such a "tonal" environment seems unequivocal. Is it the only way? Is the dancer really "losing her ground" when deprived of music? Straus, with his very word "tone," actually gives us direction for a different conclusion. *Tone*, etymologically, designates more than a musical concept. The word comes from the Greek *tónos* and it points to a certain tension between two poles of attachment: i.e., tension of a muscle, of a tendon, of a string, which ultimately translates into the tension of a lyre, giving way to the word *tone* as a musical concept. This ligamental tension is the same as we find at the origin of the word *dance* found in most European languages: *Tanz, danz, danse, dança, dans, tanec*—all come from the Indo-European root **tan* which deals with the actions of tensing and relaxing. What we sensibly can extract from Straus's thesis is thus that the tone of music disposes the tone of the dancers. But as we have seen, dancers can access and relax their tone through other means than music. In CI, dancers' "personal awareness practices" (to use dancer Barbara Dilley's term) mainly deal with an awakening to the perception of gravity: through touch (sensing the effect of gravity not only on the soles of my feet but on all surfaces of the body), through disorientation (stimulating the vestibular system), through experiencing movements within (reinforcing kinesthesia and interoception), etc. In Paxton's interior technique of the Small Dance, the sensitivity to tone is even more radically apprehended as a direct object of attention, but the principle remains the same: a tuning to the tensions that define the gravitational embrace of the Earth.

Contact Improvisation is often practiced without music: it thus seems to replace the *tonal* experience of being immersed in a musical environment with the *tonic* experience of being bathed in a gravitational field. The Small Dance is the meditation of tuning in to gravity's pull; and the Contact duets, with their constant jumps and falls, a reminder of the multi-directionality of this movement. Music too, including in Contact contexts, can offer this sense of the multiplicity of tensions in space. But this relaxation of spatial attention out of the sagittal plane of pedestrian perception is certainly not limited to the space of listening with our ears. Thus, beneath or deeper than the tonal space—whose coordinates are defined by the experience of sound, we can speak of a *tonic space*—whose coordinates are defined by the experience of weight in movement—as the space where dance unfolds.

ENDNOTES

¹ Plato, *Politics* (380 BC), 266e

² Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (circa 200 BC), VI, 40.

³ "Hardly" doesn't mean this is not possible. But even the famous Kareshwaris (Standing Babas) in Hinduism, who vow to remain upright for several years as a path towards enlightenment, need the assistance of an external device to support their torso as they sleep.

⁴ "Take that young fellow who dances Paris when he's standing among the three goddesses and offering the apple to Venus. His soul is in fact located (and it's a frightful thing to see) in his elbow." Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre" (translated by Idris Parry, <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>)

⁵ Merce Cunningham, "Space, Time and Dance" (in *Transformations: Arts, Communication, Environment*, vol. 1/3, New York, 1952), p. 150.

⁶ The fact that weight appears as one of the four qualities of movement in Laban's Effort system is a good revealer of that change in aesthetics. See Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement* (1950/London: MacDonald and Evans, 1980).

⁷ Merce Cunningham, *Le danseur et la danse* (with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, Paris: Belfond, 1980), p. 44.

⁸ See Roger Smith, "The sixth sense: towards a history of muscular sensation" (Gesnerus, vol. 68/2, 2011).

⁹ See for instance Pierre Bonnier's *Le Vertige* (1893/Paris: Masson & Cie, 1904) on spatial disorientations. See also Paul Schilder, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche* (Londres: K. Paul Trench Trubner & Co, 1935), who dedicates an important section to weight sensing.

¹⁰ James Jerome Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966).

¹¹ Steve Paxton (with Elizabeth Zimmer), "The Small Dance" (*Contact Quarterly*, vol. 3.1, Fall 1977), p. 11.

- ¹² Erwin Straus, "The Upright Posture" (1950/reprinted in *Phenomenological Psychology: The Selected Papers of Erwin W. Straus*, New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 141.
- ¹³ Julian de Ajuriaguerra most notably remarks that this tonic function is the result of a "tonic dialog" between infant and primary caretaker ("De la psychomotricité au corps dans la relation avec autrui: à propos de l'œuvre de Henri Wallon", *L'évolution psychiatrique*, vol. 27, 1962). He traces his own notion of "tonic function" to the works of French child psychologist Henri Wallon. But the idea of "tonic reflex" or "tonic-postural reaction" first appeared in the works of Charles S. Sherrington (*The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1906).
- ¹⁴ See Alice C. Newton, "Basic Concepts in the Theory of Hubert Godard" (*Rolf Lines*, March 1995), p. 34.
- ¹⁵ Steve Paxton, "Solo Dancing" (*Contact Quarterly*, vol. 2.3, Spring 1977), p. 24.
- ¹⁶ Hubert Godard talks about our "ability to inhabit nomadic dwellings" as what is learned in the upright posture. ("Fond/figure," in Loïc Touzé and Mathieu Bouvier, *Pour un atlas des figures*, 2014, <http://pourunatlasdesfigures.net>)
- ¹⁷ Erwin Straus, "The Forms of Spatiality" (1930/transl. Erling Eng in *Phenomenological Psychology*, op. cit.)
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²⁰ Hubert Godard, "Le geste manquant" [The missing gesture] (with Daniel Dobbels and Claude Rabant, *Jo*, #5, 1994), p. 64: "I talk about gestosphere to designate this idea that we are constituted by what we could call core gestures. At a certain time, those gestures are bestowed upon us, and they develop more or less for certain people, so much so that each and every one of us develops a way of being in the world, with a sphere of potentials regarding the gestures that are available in front of a situation." [R.B. translation.]
- ²¹ Erwin Straus, "The Forms of Spatiality," art. cit., p. 24.

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Contact Quarterly
P.O. Box 603
Northampton, MA 01061
info@contactquarterly.com
submissions@contactquarterly.com
cqads@contactquarterly.com
ph: 413-586-1181
fax: 413-586-9055

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