

# A triangle of dance arts: Butoh, Argentine Tango and Contact Improvisation

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Summary: Contact Improvisation is compared to Butoh and Argentine tango

Motto

What is the purpose of music? *To awaken the dead.*

(ref. Monsieur de Ste Colombe)

What is the aim of dance? *To transform the body.*

I discovered contact improvisation (Contact, CI) only after having had a significant exposure to Butoh and after many years of Tango. Something had kept me ambivalent about Contact, I felt something missing in it. I felt an absence of emotional engagement — even bordering on resignation to meaningless movement. Nowadays, I think about this lack as a boundary intentionally set up to define a movement- and body-focused art form.

Amusingly, as information technologist (IT), I see here another manifestation of the CAP theorem stating more or less that you shall not have Consistency, Availability and Performance at the same time. In other words, you are always presented with a choice of 2 out of 3 things.

In my view, Contact stands firmly on two legs: embodiment and physicality — but seeks to keep away expressiveness. These three elements — *embodiment, physicality and expressiveness* — are reproduced in Tango and Butoh — but with different modality of acceptance into each of these dance forms.

By definition, Contact is a dance art that experiences embodiment through physical contact. Before saying more let me first introduce Butoh and Argentine tango.

Argentine tango (Tango) is the original tango developed in Argentina in the early 20th century featuring a couple's dance with a clearly defined leader and follower — roles very strongly embraced by men and women, respectively. It is a dance clearly designed to act out strongly defined binary gender roles. The leader is expected to open the space for the movement of the follower who is expected to fill and close the space with expression. The torsos of the dancers as well as legs and arms come in contact while each is responsible for their own balance. The vertical axis of the spine of each dancer is essential in communicating the intended movement while pushing, pulling or giving weight to the other is strictly out of bounds. For this reason I say that Tango uses contact through space while actual physical contact helps to establish the existence of space where movement can occur. For example, when the follower stands on one foot the other is free to move — this can be felt by the leader whose hand rests lightly on the follower's back. The leader can then deploy a plan of a movement sequence and elegantly usher the follower into it. The subtle ways in which space and physical contact interact makes Tango a very technical dance. In my view, the high technicality of Tango allows it to be an improvised dance. Tango is the technique of embrace.

Fig. 1 — Tango. Couple performing. —



Butoh is a dance form originating in Japan in the 1960s as a combination of Japanese theatrical tradition known as Kabuki with European expressionist influences. It is often talked about as the “dance of darkness.” Arguably it is not a dance form but a form of performance art. The Butoh dancer mentally transforms themselves into a different type of being — a being that is dead, inanimate, other species, alien, — and allows the body to exhibit that through movement, emotion, conduct, non-verbal expression. Most importantly for this discussion, the dancer is not seeking to encounter another human body but rather to transform oneself into another, often a dark and inhuman being. This transformative encounter of otherness in one’s own being produces the expressive drama breaking outwardly during a Butoh performance dance. As far as technique of movement goes Butoh borrows heavily from the Japanese Kabuki tradition by constraining the movement to the vertically suspended body with limits on horizontal movement. The demands of any technique in Butoh are easily overridden by the

expressive drama of the transformative encounter.

Fig. 2. — Butoh performance.



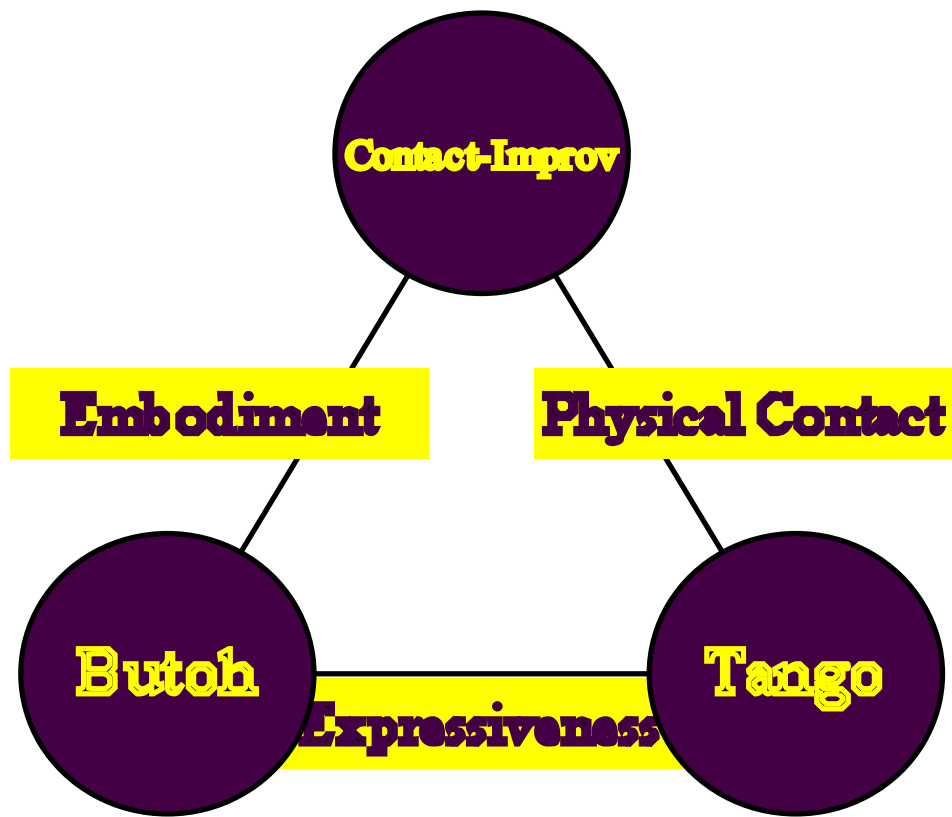
Contact improvisation is, by comparison, cheerful and serene. The body is seen as a natural implementation of the movement of the human individual and treated integrally as a body of movement. The dance results from physical contact between actual bodies which can feel the interest of each other in the movement and assist each other in moving. The technique is one of appropriate pressure on the body and understanding of the body as an integral apparatus of movement. Contact improvisation seeks another human body for physical contact but seeks nothing to express. It is indifferent to the presence of the other, but seeks to use it as one's own — without expressive drama — without the provocation of a gendered encounter like in Tango and without the drama of transformation into the dark being of Butoh. Indifferent to the presence of the other may be too strong a term to use, but certainly in CI the dancer seek similarity and cooperation in which tension disappears.

Fig. 3. — Contact-Impro dancers.



In my view, there are three elements, or attributes, that are shared unequally between these three types of art: expression, embodiment and physical contact. Each of the three arts owns only two of these elements and misses one. This is well shown in a triangular diagram. The vertices of the triangle represent the arts, whereas the edges the three elements. The edges adjacent to a node are attributes that the art possesses, while the far edge is the attribute missing.

Fig.4. — Diagram illustrating the argument.



*Embodiment* is the attitude that takes the body as the central locus and instrument of experience. The body is the prime actor and recipient of experience. It may be said that the body is elevated here over other possible avenues of lived experience such as mind or soul. So understood, embodiment is not present in Tango where the experience is expected to be driven by mental states while applying a specific technique to merely handle the body. Embodiment is present very strongly in CI where the body is at the center of the encounter. CI is not just about a single body. CI looks at the encounter and movement of the multiplicity of bodies as a crucial aspect of embodiment. In Butoh, embodiment is essential to the transformation where it is the material of transformation into a different kind of being. The Butoh body, which is obviously always human, is used to visit and relate to the audience the experience of another, possibly inhuman, body.

*Expression, expressiveness* — is about the experience manifesting

outwardly due to the wish to be seen rather than resulting from the desire to represent or describe. Expression is the opposite of representation as the latter is a purposeful staging of semantics made in order to be understood. Expression is an explosion of gestures and language which does not care whether it is understood but responds to the commanding presence of experience. Response to the force of experience is the source of expressionist art. Expression is avoided in contact improvisation. Contact limits itself to bodies seeking their own element: the capability of movement and physical contact. Expression is fully present in Butoh which seeks to relate the experience of otherness, often otherworldly, into the ordinary space of dance performance. In Argentine tango, the expression begins with the dancers entering the embrace and its mental state. Then they relate their experience to each other — within the embrace which allows for improvisation and further development of expression. It may seem counterintuitive but in Tango, as practiced socially, the dance partners are also audience and dance for each other.

*Physical contact* is the most straightforward to understand — especially for contact improvisers. It is about the body seeking another body. A body looks for physical contact because physicality is its basic mode of experience. Another body helps to understand one's own body and its capability. Physical contact facilitates a revelation of the bodily faculty of movement. This is the core of contact improvisation and its main motivation. Physical contact in CI underscores the similarity of the bodies and manifests their embodied knowledge. In Butoh, physical contact is avoided wherein the body is the subject of a radical transformation rather than assimilation. The Butoh body seeks transformation through experience different than contact with another body. Body contact in Butoh is a collision of universes of otherness rather than a human interaction. In Tango, there is plenty of physical contact — as noted above — but it is used to define the difference between the bodies and thus is mostly limited to a technical aspect — it is there in order to inform the partners about where they physically are and to constructively support the leader-follower interaction. Additionally, it can be sensual — and cooperate with the generation of

expression of the dance. However, Tango is not embodied as the body itself is shut away from the domain of physical contact by its technique and treated as merely constructive element.

These arguments can be bolstered by observing the type of music preferred to accompany the three arts. CI prefers monotonous, motoric music or no music at all to better enable hearing the “music of the body.” Tango chooses music that provides a rich emotional and soulful program to the performance, while Butoh often seeks out industrial sounds and harsh special sound effects to guide the performer into transformation.

One might wonder why it is that different arts choose to use their specific means and methods while deselecting some others. In the case of the three arts discussed here, I observe a degree of intermingling, with attraction and repulsion, — based on the presence and absence of the three characters. Like three actors that can appear on different stages in the same theater.

[*Note: images for Tango and CI are public domain, and Butoh is used with permission of Daipan Butoh Collective*]