

Fascia is Fashion

Many years ago I ate a mango for the first time, and although I no longer know how long it has been, I can still clearly remember the tart sweetness, the strange, soft consistency of the flesh, and how the fruit's aroma surprised me. I had discovered them in a delicatessen shop, where a whole heap of them was piled up in front of a sign that touted the novelty and exoticism of the fruit. So I bought one, and it actually did taste new and exotic.

In the last two years similarly an (apparent) novelty has become established in contact improvisation: workshops around fascia. In my view, this trend clearly represents positive currents gaining entry into contact improvisation. Working with our fascia makes our dances and bodies softer, smoother and more permeable. The dancer learns to adapt and reduce his or her muscle tone with respect to the situation with the minimum necessary tone needed to attain flowing, free, and floating dances. Strength and muscular effort that are unnecessarily exaggerated become superfluous.

Fascia work fundamentally allows us to reach deep structures of our musculoskeletal architecture, discovering new possibilities for floating bones, for our light skeleton submerged within fluid muscle and connective tissue systems. This enables us to listen more deeply to our own bodies, the body of our partner, and to the shared movement.

I had my first encounter with this work about 15 years ago—without having had an inkling that I was working with fascia. At that time the dancer and choreographer **Russell Maliphant**, who is also a trained Rolfer, encouraged me to do specific research on this subject. He also referred me to **Tom Myers** and his work and published research. Myers' research, publications, and workshops were at this time mainly directed at Rolfers and yoga teachers – and I dove into.

The next 12 years were characterized by practical exploration of tangible insights into fascia (regarding Rolfing/myofascial massage/yoga—but also through the process of actually assisting & studying the body sections of dead corpses) and their practical implementation in the physical work of the dancer.

I was particularly interested in how the ease, the flow of this work, could be integrated in solo, duet dances, and contact improvisation. I formed 'research groups' with different dancers, and we engaged in exchanges together with a variety of body therapists – Gyrotonic, Body-Mind Centering, Shiatsu, Yoga, Noguchitaiso.

These meetings lasted between one week and several months. The focus of the research was not on theoretical exchange, but on shared physical work in the studio. This exchange showed me how diverse and rich in perspectives the subject of fascia is in the activity of dancing. With each new item of information, this approach became more complex and multifaceted, the image of the body's fascia more complete and comprehensive, and therefore interwoven into our dances. Even now, every day I am striving to deepen this image further.

In the wake of this long and intensive study, I admittedly have a sceptical view of the new trend of fascia workshops I see emerging. At ECITE (European CI Teachers Exchange) 2012 in Bern, a discussion panel on the topic of fascia took place for the first time. In the context of this discussion excerpts were also shown from the film "Strolling under the Skin". For many both seemed fascinating and completely new.

Leading up to ECITE 2013 (Poland), the abundance of fascia workshops within the CI community increased abruptly. During ECITE 2013, I participated in a working group on fascia, and I was very disillusioned. Many of the participants and teachers used the language about fascia and structural integration but seemed unable to implement these concepts in their own bodies and dances.

Although a great deal of interest is evident, it seems to me that the knowledge of fascia is very superficial. It is still theoretical and not yet fully embodied. The movement qualities of many of these dancers had not changed despite all the talk about fascia – only the words and examples had become different: trendy, and enriched with attractive gadgets (e.g. the tensegrity model) and new books.

Jamming at ECITE 2012 and 2013, I encountered a style in which the dancers approached each other in fast, forceful ways – precisely the opposite of what working with fascia is meant to teach. Working with fascia – in my view – entails a profound and active listening before action. I felt it was almost completely absent. Instead, I observed dancers who, with high muscle tone, engaged with the dance in a way that was quick, wild and overactive, without any true listening.

In this situation I longingly remembered **Steve Paxton's** statement (shortly before CI 36): 'If I would teach CI today, I would actually teach people first just to be 'still' for 1 hour. Beginning by standing in pairs of two, beside each other, I would lead them just to stand 'still' during a first 30 minutes, witnessing their own small dance – and then, for the next 25 to 30 minutes still standing 'still' beside his or her partner, observing and witnessing the two small dances together ... and only then – from that place and that moment – to start to dance Contact Improvisation. Because – what I observed these last years at almost every jam is ... always doing, doing ... wanting to do and dance.'

I share Paxton's opinion when he says that this intensive listening engenders a quality that leads the shared dance into an entirely different sphere.

(Another example to illustrate this responsive attitude, is Steve's many years of immersion in his subject of "Material for the Spine", through which he attains progressive depth.)

The founders and teachers of the first generation of CI – **Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith** and **Daniel Lepkoff** – pursued a same subject for decades. Through this continuous research and recapitulation, they attained a depth that is denied to anyone who only briefly deals with a subject. A depth that – in my eyes – can only be achieved through a dedicated, focused practise over many years.

It appears to me that in most representative CI workshops about Fascia, the depth is at most marginal. The generation of instructors teaching all these fascia workshops

seem to rush to offer workshops before attaining a deep understanding of the subject.

I see more and more CI dancers teaching to earn their livelihood, and they have become salesmen, though they *tend* deny this. I understand that dancers, artists, teachers, have to pay the rent, or even support a family. Nevertheless, it is important to me that important subjects such as fascia, are not taken for granted by this opportunistic sales operation.

I feel that fascia is being bargained away like a sales promotion, that fascia workshop are a hot trend used to sell workshops. This may promise short-term profit (for teachers and students), but the depth that I feel is vital for real change and understanding is impossible to attain in a one-off workshop. Working with fascia is much too valuable to each of us, to allow ourselves to trifle with it in this way.

And - Teaching, and being a truly engaged artist is – at least for me – definitely *not* a sales *business*!

I also got to know the mango as a sales promotion. However, if the mango becomes my new favourite fruit, then I will soon make an effort to buy fair-traded mangoes. The enjoyment of each mango will be something very special. The mango will never become a mass product to me. I also wish to have this mindfulness for the subject of fascia in dance.

I appeal to all dancers and teachers, not to destroy this valuable subject through haste and impatience.

Thomas Mettler – Camedo / Switzerland – (summer 2014)

(During the nights of Ecite 2013, writing out first thoughts of the lines above, I was listening to all kinds of music on headphones–and I stumbled on some lyrics from a song by the rock musician Nils Lofgren)

DREAM BIG. WORK HARD. STAY HUMBLE.

*And you can dance a lot
We need to dance a lot*

*You better dance a lot
You gotta dance a lot
Dream big and dance a lot*

*You gotta dance a lot
You sure better dance a lot*