

TWO FOR SENSATION

How can we use sensation for improvisation?

A research residency in dance improvisation, carried out by Maya Dalinsky and Keren Hoffman over two weeks (November 17-21, 24, 25 and 28) from 10-15.00 every day at Forsøgsstationen.

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Keren Hoffman is a dance artist and facilitator, working as a freelancer in Copenhagen since 2023.

Process

Keren and Maya met through Forsøgsstationen and began collaborating after improvising together as part of the music and dance improv sessions that Maya facilitates there with bassist Jonathan Aardestrup.

In early spring 2025, we met a few times to talk but also to begin a studio practice where we could revive various touch-based scores from our respective backgrounds in dance, action theater, somatic work, etc. Both of us enjoy improvisation and are interested in regular studio practice as a way to stay connected with spontaneous choreography and embodied practice. We also wanted to experiment with partner exercises that one cannot do alone, to use sensation as fuel for movement research and establish an ongoing dialogue about what improvisation means to each of us.

One of the first times we met in the studio, we asked ourselves: Why do dancers love working with touch so much? Why do they love touch? So we were motivated to continue meeting and develop a practice that could allow us to research the sensations that are present when two people encounter one another. How does that physical encounter spark sensation, spark the body which sparks movement?

Leading up to our residency, we took time to search our own respective journals/archives to collect exercises, prompts or scores that we've been wanting to try but haven't had a partner to try them with. Some of these came from workshops with improvisation mentors like Rosalind Crisp, Ruth Zapora, Andrew Morrish, etc. or were sourced in techniques like Body-Mind Centering, Skinner Releasing, Contact Improvisation, etc. Other exercises or prompts simply came from our own respective movement practices: Keren's "ongoing movement" score, or Maya's "I touch what I see on the outside / I touch what I see on the inside" partner score, etc.

On the other hand, we also intentionally put off “preparing” the experiment, or each daily session, in an effort to consciously remain with uncertainty: We practice to discover what our methods are, so we do not need a method going in. We don’t need to prepare specific materials or questions, rather we trust that through communicating, improvising and embodied practice, we discover the nuances of our question and methodology.

Some of the guiding principles we did agree on as we worked included:

- Striking a balance between discussion, physical practice and reflection. How can we ensure that we don’t only *verbalize* our way through the research? What can we put into place in order to return to the body whenever possible?
- Staying with the question/critical approach: Some exercises or scores inevitably lead to answers that make sense in the moment—how can we suspend the desire to generalize those experiences into “ultimatums” about improvisation or dance? How can we stay with the question and bring it nuance, deepen it, rather than get too caught up in finding answers? At what stage in the research does this occur: is it before we start, a kind of pact we make? Or is it something we keep in mind as we design exercises? Or is it simply an attitude to maintain whenever we embark on an exploration?
- Staying with the present: Our bodies are in the world, and we are affected by the state of the world. How can we fold that into the practice and tap into all aspects of the present—even unpleasant ones, or heady political ones, or pop-kitsch ones, etc.--to nourish our improvisations, and understand how that feeds into our research on sensation?

Starting on the first day, we reached an agreement on a general order of events for the practice:

- arrive, have coffee or tea, chat, do some planning
- get into the body: individually, or perhaps by an opening “check-in” solo for one another
- more warming up
- reconvene to discuss what feels relevant today and propose a “next step”; an exercise or experiment to try next
- spend time trying it out, fine-tuning the design of what we’re doing, watching one another or not, letting it evolve
- time for reflection, journaling and documenting the practice
- lunch
- post-lunch re-warmup
- afternoon work session: new scores to try, or possible new iterations of things we touched on in the morning
- “check-out” closing solo

The experiment was as much about physical practice: being two in the studio to work with touch-based exercises, being two in the studio to witness and perform for one another, etc., as it was about developing a method or designing a regular practice for getting deeper into the question of how we use sensation to dance/improvise.

The studio time intentionally folded in moments for reflection and feedback, as there was no predetermined agenda. We were free to move at our own pace and take moments for writing and discussing as needed.

Some important feedback structures we relied on throughout the research were: opening/closing solos as a ritual to open oneself up to 'performing' and 'witnessing', and as a way to check in with one's current mind-body state; documenting our process in writing; designing exercises where we take turns dancing and witnessing. We also shared a lot of references with each other on whatsapp: book recommendations, links, etc.

Our communication on/through the process was an ongoing non-hierarchical conversation, which is to say that we didn't have roles of decision-making or leading. Instead, we took our time in conversation, which had the quality of dance improvisation with a partner: "We're tuned to what is present now, we offer, we accept, we play with leading and following, we join, we listen to ourselves and to each other". In other words, the movement improvisation reflected our verbal communication, and vice versa. We aligned quite intuitively in a desire to take this time to "take time"--a residency offers the freedom to dig deeper into an interest that might spontaneously emerge, or to reflect in detail about the societal or philosophical implications of what we experience, or simply to try things over and over with minor adjustments.

Findings

Some thoughts, questions and reflections that came out of this time together include:

- What is a sensation? How can we describe a sensation? Is it to be described with nouns and adverbs? Or is it an action? Something that moves?
- The realisation that we don't want to present our research as a performance, or to try making other people experience what we did.
- We worked mainly with the sensation of touch, but as we practiced, we also discovered that touch is not a self-contained sensation: it is informed by vision, sound, smell, taste, proprioception... and influences those things in return. So we were also surprised to find ourselves exploring sound, language, resonance, reverberation, rhythm, musicality... in relation to space and time.
- We were surprised to discover how it is nearly impossible to dissociate sensation from action: there is a difference between being a sensing body and stimulating

sensation in oneself or someone else. Actions create sensorial feedback in my own body as much as they stimulate another person's sensations or create sensory events in the shared environment.

- Sometimes we add a parameter to help focus our attention or make it clearer how to research sensation. The parameter might be related to our position in space: start in one place, end up in another, find a trajectory, find a pattern along the floor. Or it might be an attitude: just follow the sensation without overthinking it, without bringing in compositional tools, or follow the sensation and try to use it somehow, try to ask a question, try to embody it in a specific way. Or it might be compositional: explore a sensation through movement quickly, slowly, internally, taking up a lot of space, with words, in silence, in response to someone else, etc. Sometimes we decide on parameters before beginning, sometimes we design an exercise that lets us communicate while doing.
- How can we keep investigating the “transference” of sensation? How can we explore alone but then also benefit from the presence of another person, benefit from their dancing? What if we dance together not to duet but to be available for one another as sources of sensation and inspiration? What if our bodies are a shared environment?
- The ambiguous space of the studio as a place for vulnerable research and vulnerable performing: Improvisation does not operate along the same paradigms of spectator-performer, technique-output that you might find in more codified dance techniques/systems. It is similar to martial arts: there are guiding principles and then a lot of experimenting in the moment, a lot of “real doing” that can fail or also have unexpected results. There is a commitment to staying present to what is happening in the moment without projecting too far into the future, yet also following an interest or a question into the very specific, singular place that interest or question might want to go. An improvisational studio practice therefore depends on regularity and listening.
- We remain committed to *research* during these two weeks—we are not looking for the beginnings of a performance, rather exploring the materials and methods simultaneously. We do not desire to solve a problem or come to conclusions, even if the by-product might be that we identify or can express some findings, tools, answers...

“I’m here to dance and to do solos for Keren where I can take more risks with my dancing—be more vulnerable, allow more time, undo what I think I know, be less precious, etc. I’m here to watch Keren go where the inspiration takes her and to enjoy her dancing and offer a space for her to go further. I’m here to keep practice alive because I position myself as an improviser working with dance who wants to keep a special “dance heritage” (of post-modern dance) alive through doing and holding space.” (excerpt from Maya’s notes)

- Sensation is not an isolated phenomenon—it is connection, it is the encounter and the stimulation of that encounter. This is made evident by the fact that working as two dancers offers so many interesting ways to explore the potential of new sensation because it is hard to stimulate sensation alone. There is something about the difference, the unfamiliarity of what is offered, that awakens action, perception and imagination. Sensation is not an indicator of what is stable, it is an indicator of what is changing!
- Dealing with sensations in the context of dance improvisation invites me to create a form to whatever I sense. This action of **performing** my inner sensations is an act of art that has the potential of being a transformative mental or even spiritual process. Making constant decisions following sensations, with being fully in the moment and listening to what is here now, is a creative action that can be the meeting point between art and life, dance and healing, performance and therapy...(not necessarily, but it happened to me more than once)

An inexhaustive list of ways we used sensation for improvisation, following our 2-week research residency:

- Pay attention to a sensation and highlight it
- Use it to identify a part of the body or a place in the body to move from
- Move the sensation
- Let it guide what to notice: pour attention into the sensation or spread attention away from the sensation to notice something else
- Use it as a path toward imagining the body, the imaginary shape, texture qualities
- Stimulate sensation in someone else in order to get feedback about your own body's activity
- Follow an initial small movement that springs out from the sensorial input and make it grow/repeat it/transform it into something else
- Let sensation offer a mental image of what is touched
- Let sensation remind you of something
- Hold sensation in your attention in order to undo ideas/over-thinking
- Let sensation flourish into a character or a story, awaken the imagination or emotions
- Breathe into sensation to calm the mind/nerves

This research was very generative for "designing" exercises or performance scores for two people to work together using sensation/touch as the motor for their dancing. Some of our favorites include:

- We take turns deciding what we do, but we can only name the following elements: "one", "two", "touch", "no touch", "inside", "outside" (or other relevant terms). You have to use at least one term or maximum, all terms. Then we always do 2 minutes.

- Little exercise before this: 5 minute solo, watcher can come in at any moment and offer sensations to the mover, then leaves again to let the mover continue on her own. The watcher gives a sensation of something they see or something different!
- Receiver remains still, offerer offers touch for about a minute. Then receiver does what they want with what they received! At the end of the receiver's exploration, they verbalize what they're doing in a short sentence or two. Then the offerer can also try to recap what they did in one or two sentences.
- Person A starts moving without Person B watching, when she finds a sensation, she names it and says it to Person B. Person B then does a 3 minute solo. After 3 minutes, Person A enters the space while Person B carries on. Person A tries to "receive" the sensations of Person B, through all means necessary. When the transfer feels complete, Person A continues with a solo and Person B leaves the space to watch. After about three minutes, Person A can find an end.
- Speculative anatomy: map a region of the mover's face through touch, then create a "fantasy" or "imaginary" neural pathway between there to another part of the body (through touch). The receiver then moves with this new "anatomy". Change roles. Small studies: 1 minute of touch, 2 minutes of exploring.
- Game: we work independently but simultaneously. Set a pathway in space before starting to move, and move from point A to point B, continuing exploration with the organs. When you get to point B, pick a new trajectory to complete. Before starting, one of us offers two "parameters" or "elements" or "points of focus" to work with. The first crossing, however, is without any verbal input.
- Person A is sensing for 30 seconds, in silence. Person B comes to offer one kind of touch for a full minute, then leaves. Person A remains still for 30 seconds to continue sensing. Then Person A begins to move to explore, until they feel ready to "perform". Then they say "Perform!" or "Begin performance" and then do a solo. They also say "end" to call the end.
- Both begin together moving from point A to point B, across the floor. Fill up the body with sensations and movement. When you get to your destination, one person can say TWO things they're busy with or want to name, and the other will embody those things in a dance that takes them along a new trajectory. The person who talked just stays where they are and watches. When the dancing person arrives at their new point, it's their turn to offer TWO things, then they stay put and the other person dances. You embody the elements right away, but you can take time to offer new instructions/names at the end of your dance. You are free to choose your trajectory and timing, but you embody/move the sensations/instructions given by the other person. It's a bit of a relay game in the space. You do not always have to go to the extremities of the space—you can choose any kind of pathway.

- Naming Sensations “Anna’s version”: Begin moving, both working independently but simultaneously. When someone identifies a sensation, they name it out loud. We both build on top of that named sensation without changing to a new one, we try to see how deepening the physical exploration might connect to new sensations. Then when someone feels there’s a new sensation, name it out loud. More about **development** rather than **shifting**. So one “image” is named, i.e. tight shoulders, and the body embodies it and lets it develop and then follow the body into other sensations. How long can we stay in one “world of sensations”?

Finally, we hoped to host a small “workshop” during this residency as a way to fold more voices into the research and bring some of our practices to other bodies. Unfortunately, Maya got sick and the initial workshop got cancelled/transformed into a one-on-one work session between Keren and an invited guest. Still, it was useful to ask ourselves *if* and *how* we wanted to share—it made us reflect on what we want to prioritize (improvisation, process, research) and how to transmit these ideas in a way that doesn’t adversely affect our workflow.

We were fortunate to be in residency close to the December Platform showing, which meant that we could “re-activate” the practice, still fresh, as a way of sharing it rather than schedule additional sessions to design and “rehearse” what we wanted to say or do. The Platform was simply an additional, albeit shorter, practice session with the added layer of many witnesses. It was a chance to see how our attention to sensation might be altered by the presence of a public, and how we invite newcomers to “practice” alongside us. How can we stretch the studio space just enough to include a larger set of witnesses?

Next Steps

One question Maya has now is: how do we better understand the role of improvisation in our respective choreographic processes after this time together?

We came together because we both love improv and therefore we could get to work without having to explain to one another what we understand as improv. It has been really beneficial to have a common ground for embarking on this experiment because we take for granted that improv is the way to work. However: Maya is curious about articulating how improv is maybe a special way of studying something. Why do we (specifically, Maya and Keren) move from sensation/with sensation and not just sense sensation? We can have different answers to this question, and our answer to it can change over time.

Keren says: I feel like dancers, movers, in a way they always move with/from sensation, but maybe the sensations are not always conscious. It’s the art of sensations! There’s always feedback from your limbs, the gravity, your muscles... And it’s fun to really notice sensations, to emphasize them. Maybe it’s not possible/necessary to do that all the time. For me there is a question about performance, all the time. Questions about improvisation and performance, and the thin line between movement research, sharing your movement

research, performing your research, witnessing or watching... and it's all in the same world. They might not be separate. But there is joy in sharing, in being witnessed. So the next level, for me, would be asking how can we share this with a wider audience? What kind of event would support my needs as a performer/dancer? Is it relevant for other people?