

Gesturing and Touching

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I clearly remember the exact moment when it finally dawned on me, although I'd known it for a long time. It was December 2007. Elise Butler, my former salsa student and frequent dance partner, was home for the winter holidays from New York University, where she was a student. During the holiday we had only an hour or so to meet, catch up, and dance a little. We chatted a bit over coffee and then turned on the music to dance salsa. As we danced the familiar joy and ease of dancing together quickly returned. I never fail to be amazed at how great it is to really dance with another person and dancing with Elise is really fun. The moment came when in the middle of leading Elise in a simple right turn I was suddenly inspired to change it into a left turn. I was astounded that Elise followed this without a hitch or jerk. She smiled to show her pleasure at seamlessly following this surprise lead. We were truly connected in our dancing; we had what I now call the salsa connection and what has become the center piece of what distinguishes my approach to teaching salsa.

Salsa dancing is comprised of a set of ten basic foot patterns and a range of hand, arm, and upper body gestures that create the connection between lead and follow. In my teaching I have replaced the notion that leads lead and follows *just* follow along, with a notion that, through touch, the lead and follow are inseparable through their interactive gestures. Anyone who has gained a bit of competence in partnering dancing understands how through mastery of the gestural patterns and the skillful active connection through touching, the results are that two people become one, each experiences her/his body extended into the movement/gesturing of the other. This too is a way, in dancing, of experiencing what I refer to as self-othering.

Building on Noland's rich understanding of gesturing, as we analyze the gestural processes of salsa dancing, something I would/could never do on the dance floor, we gain some insights into gesture. In learning to dance salsa, or any partner contact dance, the cultural/social/psychological values insinuate themselves, through high repetition training, into the muscles, ligaments, and neurology of the dancer. The person becomes a salsa dancer in that literal sense of muscle fibers and neurons. In the act of salsa dancing, the gestural patterns express the values sutured to them by society, but these same acts of gesturing are also exploratory in that they are the means by which to know one's partner. The socially prescribed gestural methods of touching another person serve to collect and absorb at the level of the tissues remarkable amounts of information about one's dance partner. There is inevitably also an emotional component to this information, this contact through gesture. One feels and experiences the connection and the information absorbed often through the lightest physical touch.

In this lecture I want to explore especially the notion that gesturing is inseparable from touch and to pursue further that gesturing is also a way of exploring the world, acquiring knowledge of the environment, and affecting the world not only by offering an expression and transmission of tradition, but by incorporating change.

We can declare that gesturing is inextricably linked with touch. Erin Manning's 2007 book *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* offers some insights. Her chapter "Negotiating Influence: Touch and Tango" is a discussion of touch as an essential aspect of gesture (however metaphoric and virtual) illustrated through occasional examples clearly inspired by her experience as a tango dancer.

Let me begin to explore how Manning associates touch and gesture. I'll start with her tango example. Like salsa dancing, in tango there are gestural aspects of tango which are comprised of the rules, conventions, and rhythms that provide distinction to the dance. These are acquired as one learns the dance and are shared among and abided by all tango dancers; they constitute something of what I think she is pointing to as a politic. These rules and conventions establish and order the group. The rules and conventions become gesture through repetition and performance, that is, through taking tango lessons, receiving tango instruction and critique, and dancing tango with partners. The result is that the rules and conventions that define the basic movement elements become gestures, sensorimotor programs that amount to the acquisition of tango skill by the dancer.

Tango dancing is not done by oneself (well, with some exceptions) but with a partner. The connection through touch is fundamental to the relationship and thus to the dance. Manning explores the touching aspect of tango as a way of illuminating the touch aspect of gesture. Touching evokes of gesture a condition of being multiple, that is, the touching aspect of tango gesturing (and gesturing itself) is an interaction, a reaching toward an other, a connection and identity with an other yet with the simultaneous assurance that the other is different, and never fully touchable or reachable. The reaching forth that is gesturing carries the potentiality of connection, while implying something tenuous and ephemeral. Manning, I believe, is quite insightful here in seeing that the touch aspect of gesture redirects away from that simplistic understanding of gesture as trace or as visible act of communication. Touch directs us to a much richer understanding of gesturing as potentiality-in-movement. Touch, in terms we have mentioned before, is the inherent reversibility, interactivity, unrealizability, potentiality aspect of gesturing. As Manning states it:

As a movement reaching toward, a gesture evokes an instance in which nothing is absolutely maintained. A gesture explores the medium—be it the movement, the touch, the word—as a means not of transforming potentiality into actuality, but as a way of eclipsing actuality by placing the emphasis on the movement itself, on the exchange. ... Gesture as such has nothing to say. It is only relationally that gestures create the possibility for exchange. Gestures negotiate both transgression and understanding.¹

Touch then is the aspect that reminds us that all gestures are incomplete.

The touch aspect of gesture is associated with knowing and constructing self and environment. As Manning writes, "it is through touching you that my body is a body, for my body cannot be otherwise

¹ Manning, p. 8.

than singular and plural.”² This reminds us of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s notion that we discover ourselves in movement, now, with reference to gesture, articulated in somewhat more precise terms.

Touch is also the aspect of gesturing that points to the perhaps unexpected spontaneity and improvisational aspects of gesture. While it is easy for us to see gesture as routinized behavior, it may be more difficult to see that despite its identity with sensorimotor programming, it has the possibility for change. Here is how Manning states it, “This play between transgression and cohesion takes place in the weaving of tango’s complex webs, webs entwined around tango’s implicit desire to communicate, through the body, with an other. A dance that must be re-encounter with every new dancer, tango appeals to the senses. It does so through microperceptual movements initiated through improvisation and spontaneity that requires an adequate response yet suggest, always, the possibility of subverting the unexpected.”³

However, at base, the tango is a gestural pattern through which two dancers touching are at once expressing themselves in various dimensions from the intention to move in a specified way to the expression of desire which, according to the conventions of the dance, will remain unfulfilled (at least during the dance). Yet, through the touch connection of the gestural patternings, the dancers are learning about one another, are improvising movement patterns (seemingly seamlessly), and actually creating space and time.

Now the tango as a dance where the partners hold one another in close embrace is an example that serves well to assure us that touch is an aspect of tango gesturing, yet clearly only perhaps a minor portion of all gesturing involves physical touching another body. How then, we need ask, is touch relevant to those gesturings where there is no physical touching of an other. As a sensorimotor programmed bodily movement, gesture always requires the interoceptive or “inner touch” for the movement to be identifiable as gestural. Thus there is always touch even if it is virtual or inner or self.

Dancing is exemplary gestural act in its style of gesturing which always evokes an other in a gestural act that identifies dancing as a bodily exploration of gesturing in itself, a reflexive act of reaching without grasping, an interaction, yet that has no message. Dancing is gesturing that is the incomplete reversibility of self-othering.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Ibid., p. 3.