

Elsewhere: Chris Aiken in conversation with Kinebago's Sara Smith

Critical Correspondence is pleased to share with you an excerpt of a conversation from Kinebago, a magazine created to foster the documentation and contemplation of dance and movement-based practices in New England. Here, improvisor/dance maker/teacher Chris Aiken talks with Kinebago founder Sara Smith about the ways in which what he calls an “ecological practice” transforms his perceptual, aesthetic and relational capacities as a performer.

Kinebago/Sara Smith: We were talking last time about choices in movement. In my movement practice...I'm not a contact improvisor...but when I'm in the studio improvising, a lot of what I'm interested in is this interruption of automatic patterns. And I'm dancing with the space, with the architecture. But that gets a lot more complicated in contact, when you're also responsible for somebody else, for that person's well-being...

Chris Aiken: And your own well-being!

Kinebago: Right!

Chris: So, with contact being as demanding as it is, in terms of dealing with weight, with disorientation, with another person...it can cause people to develop very habitual ways of responding to that. And it's difficult to keep it fresh. To get to a place where you're able to keep that improvisation alive, and not just rely on familiar ways of doing contact...it's difficult. But I'm disappointed when people describe me as a contact artist, because I don't think of myself as a contact artist. I think of myself as an improvisor who makes dances, who has a high-level of skill in contact from years of experience, but I'm never setting out to use contact as the means for expressing my aesthetic sensibility. That's not to deny that contact IS part of my aesthetic sensibility, but it isn't front and center.

I often think that what I have to offer the world of contact, is a link to what I call the perceptual roots of contact, which come from Steve [Paxton], and Nancy [Stark Smith]. Steve created this form, and as he was creating it—I'm sure he was already interested in perception—but the practice of contact very quickly became an amazing laboratory for observing yourself. Observing the moments when you have gaps of consciousness, when the speed of the dancing is so fast that your reflexes kick in, and you leave your body for a second and then come back. And you're like “Ooh, wow! My body just took over!” And it's exciting—your body just took care of you! But Steve was also interested in if you could you stay conscious in those moments.

Kinebago: I heard him talk last year at Smith [College], and he was talking about noticing

when your eyes want to close, and how that cuts off the visual feedback you get, and you might want to work on not automatically closing your eyes. It was a fascinating talk.

Chris: Yeah. So, contact both provided an avenue for observing yourself in high-stress situations, how adrenaline affects you, and how to inhibit certain reflexes in order to access other states, or other movement possibilities, such as pulling your head down when you start to fall, instead of extending out into space. Like, an Akido roll gives you the chance to jump into space as you're falling towards your head, to turn your body into a wheel so you roll. Once you develop those skills, your body stays open as you're falling, rather than contracting. So, being able to observe those reflexes, and have a relationship to them, and retrain them, so to speak...but also to realize that your perceptual frame, or your foundation, doesn't have to be fixed. Each of us has a singular, perceptual vantage point from which we live. It's particular to each person. And in that construction and sensibility, certain senses are highlighted and accentuated, or are suppressed and not activated, or not developed. Most of us are not aware of this—we're just living. But with contact, by ramping up, or elevating, the amount of sensory information I was getting through my skin—my haptic sense—I realized that I was changing.

Contact gives you...a capacity to perceive your back-space, to perceive surface and depth that's not available to your eyes. But if I touch you, it gives me a huge insight into how you're organized structurally. So much information is available through your haptic sense—through pressure, texture, temperature. It's like a laboratory. Once you develop that sense, you realize, "Wow, I can develop any of my senses!" And I can reorganize that perceptual frame, or foundation, from which I view the world. And for me that was huge.

Kinebago: It IS huge!

Chris: Yeah. It not only changed who I was as a person, but it also changed how I thought about art. I believe that many people have this idea that great art comes from artists who have blinding insight. Like the myth of Mozart is that he just got these compositions that came to him, and he would just write them down.

Kinebago: Inspirational flashes.

Chris: Yeah. And if you look at his life, that wasn't true. He had a lot of training, and he was able to improvise and work on his compositions, so when he did write them down, he had gone through a process, just like anybody else.

Kinebago: Right.

Chris: So for me, the creative process is this intimate relationship between perception

and what I think of as imagination. It's your interaction with your materials—whatever they might be—and your imagination. You get an idea, and you try something and you see what happens, and you get another idea. It this process of experimenting, and then observing, returning, changing, adapting, and trying new things. Well, the means by which you make that process happen is your senses. If your senses are not skilled, you don't know what to look at. And often, people who want to be artists, they get an idea, and they're just going after that idea, and not going through all the changes that the process is suggesting. And from my perspective, the artists who are most successful, are able to...with each decision, a whole new set of decisions reveal themselves. And to see this is rooted in your perceptual skill.

And to me, this is linked to being ecologically tuned to one's environment. It isn't simply that you listen more, though that's a good start. It isn't just that you turn yourself into a massive membrane and vibrate with the universe, and then you'll know what to do and be ecologically tuned. Some of what is important in terms of making decisions about how to live, or how to make art, are things you can't see, or can't sense in the moment. I guess I think that one of the values of science is that it helps you see what you can't sense without the right tools.

Kinebago: And science also tells us that there are things we can't perceive that are still true.

Chris: Exactly. Or are only perceptible through technology.

Kinebago: Or in an even more abstract way, sometimes we know they're true because we understand mathematics, and mathematical principles are based on things we learn from the universe.

Chris: Right. And I think that that's very much connected to art. There are all kinds of things that influence how I make art that are not immediate. It's not simply my ability to sense what's happening at this moment, but it's my cultivation of an aesthetic, based on what I would think of as aesthetic research. Which is not only looking at art, but also dialoguing with others about art. And also dialoguing with artists and others about ideas, or concepts...I think it's important to think about your foundational beliefs—what are the words you say to yourself regularly: what are the words you use to describe the world you live in? I think many of us communicate to ourselves through words, or images.

Kinebago: Most of us.

Chris: Right, most of us. And if those images and words are not regularly re-examined, then they just drive you, without you being conscious of it. So, part of an ecological practice is to look beyond what's there, and towards "what will I look like if I hold these

beliefs for ten years, or for the rest of my life?” So some of what I think of as the profound changes that have happened to me as an artist, are based on values that I re-examined, and words that I changed, in relationship to art or performance. When I say “words,” I mean beliefs.

I think I said this last time we talked, but I often ask myself and others, “Why are you performing? Why are you asking people to come see you?” And I think the answer isn’t the same all the time. I try to keep myself connected to that question. I want it to be a question that I continually reconsider. I don’t want to just assume that the reasons I have for doing it are the right ones. Like for example, I think that sometimes performers think they’re sharing, but they’re really showing. “Offering” is different from showing. My interest in art making is to create a space where we can have a shared experience that’s co-created. I need the audience to share in their attention, and they need me to create the space, and to be the initiator of that experience. But it would not be what it is without them.

Kinebago: What are some of the things that you do to get at this?

Chris: One of them is that I look at the idea of “hiding” on stage. One of the ways that people hide, is showing off—they pull-out their best moves.

Kinebago: Is this something that you dealt with in your own performing?

Chris: Yeah. When I was younger, I felt like if I didn’t show people what I could do, then they wouldn’t know. I felt obligated to display my skill, so they would a) feel that they got their money’s worth, and b) that they wouldn’t doubt that I had those skills.

Kinebago: Right, so they would feel that you were worth their money and time.

Chris: Right. That I’d done my homework. But as I matured as an artist, that just faded away. I know that I’ve done the work. I don’t take it for granted, but that’s not my main consideration anymore.

Kinebago: What considerations took the place of that way of thinking?

Chris: It’s creating an experience where the audience feels me being conscious of them, not in a way of trying to please them, but in creating avenues for them to share in an experience. So, sometimes it’s looking at the audience, sometimes it’s allowing them to see me, like not habitually looking above the audience, or away. Acknowledging that they’re there. They’re not off to the side, they’re not above or below me, they’re right there. So, really including them in my visual field. And also, if I’m not looking at them, I’m

still listening to them, I'm tuning into my back when they're behind me. So, I'm considering what their reality is. I'm not privileging it over my own, but not privileging my own over them. It's just saying that in order for this to work, we have to work together.

Kinebago: It's a kind of contact improvisation.

Chris: Exactly. And noticing... there are really no recipes. But if I let [the audience] know early on that I'm with them, and I want them to be with me, and I see them, I'm welcoming them, then I can dive deep into my experience. I don't have to do it all the time, but enough so they know I'm with them. And I know it's working, because audiences consistently say that they can feel it in a way that's genuine. And to me, that's just as important as the performer recognizing the room that they're in. Every space is different and has its own possibilities. And some performers are able to connect with the space around them, and others seem to be doing the same performance no matter what the space is. And to me that's non-ecological. In a way, every performance is site-specific.

Kinebago: Right!

Chris: It's audience-specific, it's space-specific, and it's socio-politically specific, based on what happened that day in politics, or in the town. Or with the weather. One of the most amazing experiences I ever had was performing in Miami. In the middle of the performance—it was a solo—it started raining, and I could hear the rain on the roof of the theater, and the thunder, and the wind. And [the audience] could too, and we just...it was a very special moment. It was just thrilling to feel like this was a singular moment, and we were all sharing it. And I felt very connected to a much bigger cosmos. And to bring it back to the practical, I don't think that's just an aesthetic; it's a lived practice.

Kinebago: Right, it's an ethos.

Chris: Yeah, it's an ethos that you don't develop overnight; you can't just turn it on for a performance. It has to be grounded in your everyday experience. At least that's my opinion. When people ask me "how do you rehearse to improvise?" or, "how do you practice?" In a way, I'm always practicing. There's the development of the aesthetic sensibility, that's rooted in years of making and performing, but then there's also instincts that are...when you're in the midst of a performance, you cannot be analyzing all your choices—it's way too slow! So you have to have done your homework in order to have those instincts to have those choices available to you.

Kinebago: That's what practice is for.

Chris: Yeah. And practice gets rooted in your nervous system. And that takes years.

Kinebago: Right. And you do research on those physical systems too.

Chris: The science has affirmed this—the way you live, your posture, your relationships, your environment, it's all recorded in your body and your mind. And the functional structure of your being is evolving. It evolves slowly. The structure becomes the function, which becomes the structure, which becomes the function...they're inseparable. But the architecture of your experience evolves very slowly. Like, I think that if I do work for ten years, then my structure will change. If I work for ten weeks, it'll change, but not nearly so much.

Kinebago: And most dancers—no matter what form they work in—have experienced this. Over years, thinking about their turn-out, or their alignment.

Chris: Right. And this isn't rocket science. Every dancer knows that training is important, and that you are the product of your training. But in dance education there's often not as much emphasis on imagistic, and aesthetic, and conceptual training. That's more thought training, or cognitive training. Those become memes, things that change your body. But they don't do this right away. Embedded in every dance form are all kinds of ideas that are often not even really examined. They just get passed on, and the dancer evolves into that kind of dancer. Training involves a lot of images, and language, and culture, and history—much of it is passed down orally, or by watching your teacher. But I didn't want to be a passive participant in that process. Because I'm a teacher, I feel responsible to look at what I'm doing with my words and my actions that is creating openings and opportunities for people to learn and grow, and what I'm doing that's closing those avenues off without even realizing it.

And I think I told you before...and it's a constant re-learning...but years ago I finally understood the need to examine privilege, and gender. But that is just a microcosm for power. And as a teacher, how do you stay tuned in to who's on the outside, without becoming so overly sensitive that you're always care-taking? But recognizing that you can create openings, and people can come in if they feel safe enough, but making sure you're not pushing them away without realizing it. And you can't do that if you're not thinking about words, if you're not thinking about tone. So when I'm thinking about the "ecology of dance," that's just as important as sensing gravity.

Steve talked about how Robert Ellis Dunn created a freefall from "cultural gravity." Have you heard him say that? That his classes—for a period of time—they were free from the weight of culture.

And that's what I try to do as a teacher—acknowledge the world as it is, and create a space where we can experiment a bit, a little bit, not massively...I think if you create an

environment that's too radical it can blow people's circuits. I think I'm being subtly subversive. I mean, I'm teaching contact improvisation at Smith College! It's pretty wild that I've actually made a career teaching contact improvisation in a liberal arts setting. That's pretty phenomenal!

Kinebago: So when you teach these workshops that are specifically framed as an "eco-poetic approach" to improvisation, what is the focus? Is it different from what you do in your regular classroom?

Chris: It's connecting the natural sciences with the poetic imagination. I'm not a scientist, but I certainly study science. And I study the body. At the very base level, I start with perceptual systems, and how they function to co-create the world that you live in. I talk about gravity as a constant. To ignore gravity is to ignore one of the pillars of what it is to be a human being.

Kinebago: And what it is to be on this planet...

Chris: Right, exactly! We wouldn't be on this planet, we'd be out in space! And when I talk about developing the poetic imagination, I sort of try to humbly present the world of art, of making things. I ask, "what does it mean to have an aesthetic sensibility?" And I share my research as an example of what it means to have an aesthetic practice. That's what I'm teaching. I'm teaching a practice of tuning your ecological sensibility in conjunction with your poetic sensibility. Because the world is neither one nor the other—they're completely intertwined. In other words, meaning doesn't come from science. Meaning comes from the interaction of my wishes and my experiences in relationship to what is actually tangible and real. In the sense that I have a body, and there are objects in the world. And there's gravity, and plants, and animals, and the "real world." It's the interaction with the environment and my imagination. Because for me, I know that the world I'm experiencing is particular to me, and I know that your world is particular to you. Now, there are things that we share. But what helps me both remain hopeful for humanity, and for myself, is when we can share glimpses into each others' worlds, and both see the congruencies, and the differences.

So, I might not live in a world where the color pink, say, is important, but I might meet somebody who, their world is completely inspired by pink. Or like somebody who's really into wine—it's not my thing—but maybe for them, the complexity of wine is what makes them get up in the morning! Like someone who has a vineyard...I love talking to someone whose vantage point is very different from mine. I'm reminded again and again that I only have a very small experience of the world. And I think I said this to you the other day, I just had this experience with Jane Stangl, the Dean of the First-Year class [at Smith College] who made me conscious that my ideas about gender were more fixed than I thought they were. It's easy to have value judgments about things that are based on murky

assumptions. And once you have a little bit of clarity, or somebody puts a frame around something, you see things in a new way. And art does that.

So, ecology is all about relationships. It's about dialogues that are going on across time. Someone who has ecological skills is able to tune into many, many different levels of experience that are interwoven. I mean, most people who have any sense of science grasp that everything is interconnected. That seemed completely intuitive to me as a young person. And any religion that didn't start with that as a base, I couldn't buy into. So, separation of mind and body, separation of human beings from animals, or human beings from nature—I couldn't go there! It seemed completely non-intuitive. And non-scientific. One thing that science has taught me over and over and over is that everything is connected. And lastly, just to go back to John Dewey, in *Art As Experience*, he talks about the aesthetic object as the representation of the artist's relationship to their world. And so when we're celebrating that art, we are celebrating interconnectedness, between that person and the world they lived in, as represented in that work of art. And not just the world, but it's their relationship to those materials. So, when you're watching me dance, you're watching my relationship to my body, and to the world, and to my own ideas. So yeah, it's about things connecting. That's what ecology is for me. When you have ecological skills, you understand relationships.