



A Society to Me: On Conflict and Intimacy Training

Sam Wentz

This video essay weaves together live performance and rehearsal footage of a new work in progress entitled *Conflict and Intimacy Training*, a moderated discussion by Dr. Arushi Singh, and verbal quotes from established artists in the field of dance and performance. This work centers on a dialogue with the performers about the process and experience of building and performing the work. This piece was created through a rapid, minimally verbal process that emphasizes risk, failure, and play, advocating for physical experience over linguistic mediation. The conversation examines the efficacy of social justice practices like safe spaces and boundary setting, questioning their transformative potential when institutionalized.

Keywords: conflict, risk, social justice practices, improvisation, performance, process

Author Biographies

Ajani Brannum (they/them) investigates the choreographies of life in the shadow of empire. (*Where are we?*) Through a fluid, shapeshifting performative practice, they observe the forces that persist—for better, for worse, for otherwise—in and through our living. (*How are we?*) Ajani draws heavily on the knowledges they inherit as a Black queer maker with southern roots, honoring and extending the ancestral wisdoms that animate their craft. (*How do we?*) By turns contemplative and irreverent, their work invites audiences to rehearse vital forms of



Video essay comprised of rehearsal and performance footage of Conflict and Intimacy Training combined with a Zoom panel of performers and director, moderated by Dr. Arushi Singh. For the full video, visit the online journal at <https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations/>.

sensing and relation. (Why?) Ajani has created spaces of encounter with REDCAT, ODC, Human Resources Los Angeles, Materials & Applications, Highways Performance Space, Los Angeles Performance Practice, in classrooms, on tabletops and screens, and when no one is looking. Born in Anchorage, Alaska, they hold an AB in English and a Certificate in Dance from Princeton University, and a PhD in Culture and Performance from UCLA. They are also an alum of the Cecilia Weston Spiritual Academy, helmed by Jade T. Perry.

I am **Jessica Hemingway** and I am a performance artist. Rather than list my qualifications, resume, or achievements, I prefer to share my interests. As a performer I am interested in improvisation, duration, repetition, form, intensity, humor, chaos, and posing. My inspiration comes from a combined fascination of karate, voguing, lyrical jazz, ballet, flamenco, and American Sign Language. Perhaps viewed as dangerous and chaotic, my movement practice is refined, diligent, precise, joyful, and furious. My goal as a performer is to be forever changing and to channel the divine.

Mao (b. 1995) is a movement-based artist from China and currently based in Los Angeles. Mao's interests in the body concern time, restless ennui, the deceptive, and the unfinished everything. She works with movements, texts, and functional/dysfunctional/found/ready-made objects, ripening herself through absurdity and humor. Her experiences include working with Butoh group Sankai Juku, Dimitri Chamblas, Julie Bour, Rubberlegz, Oguri, Sam Wentz, and many more in a wide range of performances across Japan, France, China, and the United States. Mao graduated from California Institute of the Arts Dance Department, and she recently obtained MFA from School of the Art Institute of Chicago Performance Department.

Martina Mattar is a filmmaker and audiovisual artist from São Paulo, Brazil, based in Los Angeles. Her personal work often revolves around the poetics of vulnerability, sexuality and perception. Along with her narrative film practice, she frequently collaborates with musicians and choreographers in music videos and dance films. In 2021 she was commissioned by California State University Long Beach and choreographer Kensaku Shinohara to create a dance film with over 30 dancers, with screenings in the USA, Brazil and Japan. In 2023, she took part in Tuixéjn Benet's dance piece for NOW Fest at REDCAT. Her most robust collaboration with a musician is a series of six music videos she directed for Brazilian singer and composer Marcelo Segreto, with whom she's currently developing a series of cine-songs. As creative assistant to performance artist Simone Mattar, her work has been shown in WhiteBox gallery, SPArte, the Embassy of Brazil in Madrid and Tokyo, among others. Martina holds a Bachelor's Degree in Film and Video at California Institute of the Arts.

Judith Sánchez Ruíz is an independent artist with a rich history in performing as a choreographer, performer, teacher, and improviser. She is based in Berlin, originally from Havana, Cuba. Her dance studies began at the National School of Arts in Ciudad de la Habana at the age of 11. Throughout her career, Ms. Sanchez has collaborated with various notable entities such as Sasha Waltz & Guest (2011–2014),

Deborah Hay (2012), Trisha Brown Dance Company (2006–2009), DD Dorvillier (2002, 2019), David Zambrano (1997), Mal Pelo Company (1997–1999), and DanzAbierta Company (1991–1996). She is also the founder and, since 2010, the director of JSR Company. She is currently launching her new Professional Contemporary Dance Certification Program, WINTER 2025, with open applications until August 1, 2024. Notably, Ms. Sanchez became the first guest choreographer for the Trisha Brown Dance Company in 53 years, premiering her work titled “Let’s Talk About Bleeding” at Joyce Theater in New York City in 2023. Upcoming projects include her role as the guest commissioned choreographer at the Ballet of the City of São Paulo in Spring 2024 and at Divadlo Štúdio Tanca, Slovak, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia in Fall 2024.

kirsten michelle schnittker is a performer and maker based in Los Angeles, CA. kirsten makes dances out of improvisatory scores, layering movement, text, music, and voice. Their work examines gender, representation, relationships, and processes of self-realization. kirsten’s work has been featured in galleries, theaters, studios in Los Angeles, New York, and Switzerland. Most recently kirsten has shared their work with AUNTS in NYC and in LA at Junior High LA and Basic Space LA. kirsten has collaborated as a performer with Yanira Castro / a canary torsi, Diana Crum, Elle Erdman, Hadley Smith, Sam Wentz, and many others.

Born in Sapporo, Japan, **Kensaku Shinohara** is an artist who brings a practice in anthropology to bear on his work as a choreographer/performer. His works have been presented across the US and internationally in Toronto, Kuala Lumpur, Tainan, and Japan. Shinohara is a recipient of Foundation for Contemporary Arts, 92Y Harkness Dance Center AIR, Exploring the Metropolis AIR, Queens Arts Fund New Work Grant, Japan Foundation New York Grant for Arts & Culture to name a few. kensakushinohara.com / [@kensakushinohara](https://www.instagram.com/kensakushinohara)

Dr. Arushi Singh is a New Delhi-born, Los Angeles-based scholar, educator, and movement artist. She earned her PhD in Culture and

Performance from the University of California, Los Angeles. She also holds an MA in Arts and Aesthetics and an MPhil in Theatre and Performance Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University (India).

Stacy Dawson Stearns (she/they) believes that artists support societal well-being by modeling and instigating collective creative practice. A Bessie Award-winning artist known for her work with Big Dance Theater, David Neumann, Hal Hartley, and Blacklips Performance Cult, Stacy has choreographed for pop icons Debbie Harry and Ann Magnuson, House of Jackie, and The Vampire Cowboys, and has performed and presented in 10 countries in venues ranging from NYC's Lincoln Center to Tblisi's Teatr Griboyedov. Stacy develops new media with Channel B4 and uses her curation and programming to serve communities and further social justice, representation, and accessibility initiatives as a CultureHub LA 2023 Fellow. www.stacydawsonstearns.com

Sam Wentz is a dancer, maker, and educator based in Los Angeles. He received his MFA in Dance and Choreography as a Teaching Fellow at Bennington College in 2016. He has performed with Ajani Brannum, Trisha Brown Dance Company (2009–2014), Wally Cardona + Jennifer Lacey, Jay Carlon, Gerald Casel, Dimitri Chamblas, the Merce Cunningham Trust, Katherine Helen Fisher, Levi Gonzalez, Jmy James Kidd, Mark Morris Dance Group, Abigail Levine, Annie B. Parson, Susan Sgorbati, and Kensaku Shinohara. His own work has been presented at the Bennington Museum (VT), the Geffen Contemporary at MoCA, Human Resources LA, Pieter Performance Space, and REDCAT. He joined the CalArts School of Dance faculty in the Fall of 2018. @sam__wentz

Jacob Wolff is an interdisciplinary artist exploring the interplay of music, improvisation, and composition with other mediums through performance and operatic means. Through the relationship between body and object in performance, Wolff pushes themselves and performers beyond their training, fostering an environment of exploration and discovery. Incorporating found objects, sound,

images, and videos, their pieces revolve around personal biography represented through media, and media experienced as memory. By embracing the abstract, Wolff creates a space for viewers to embark on a transformative journey, infusing their own narratives into the artistic experience. Recently, they premiered their three-act opera, *Ribs*, in Los Angeles.