Bodies, boundaries and authenticity, dance and intimacy coordination - interview with Saskia Oidtmann

24.4.2025

I had the pleasure of interviewing Saskia Oidtmann. Saskia Oidtmann is a choreographer, dancer, lecturer, and intimacy coordinator currently based in Vienna. She develops movements, concepts and texts, which draw from a genuine corporeal origin. Her focus lies besides stage and site-specific dance projects on filmic movement realizations. She studied dance and choreography (Laban Centre London) and Film and Theatre studies (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, FU Berlin) and completed her PHD about the choreography of the event (Universität Potsdam).

How do you define intimacy coordination in your work?

It depends on which area I'm working in. I would define it differently as a choreographer than as an intimacy coordinator on a film set or theatre stage. It changes depending on the artistic field and how much power you have in creating the movement.

I would describe it as conceptualizing and choreographing intimate scenes in a way that the performer's boundaries are respected and they feel protected but on the same hand the director's vision has space to unfold.

It's not only conceptualizing or choreographing—there's substantial communication with actors, producers, sometimes camera crew, and the director. I listen to the director's vision for the scene, then look for ways to express that. I talk with all involved parties about how they see the scene and what their boundaries are. I conduct a boundary check with each performer beforehand. Then it's about arranging that scene with all departments involved. It's not just choreography—it's largely about communication and ensuring everyone shares the same vision.

These aren't just sex scenes—it also involves for example working with minors or medical procedures. For example, when there's a body on a surgery table, that needs an intimacy coordinator too, because there's supposedly an actor naked underneath the blanket. Nakedness is one aspect, but intimacy coordination applies to many different scenes beyond what we typically think of as sex scenes.

What about when you work within choreography or dance—does the definition change in that context?

Looking at being an intimacy coordinator within a dance project, the guidelines are fundamentally the same whether you're working on film, theatre, opera, or dance. But different aspects need addressing.

With live performance, you can't "cheat" as you can in film. You don't have camera angles—you have an audience viewing the body from various perspectives. They're not as close, but you need to be more careful about storytelling since you can't hide things with camera angles. That's one significant difference.

In dance specifically, it relates to how we're trained as contemporary dancers. In dance a body part is a body part— in a way touching another person's shoulder isn't fundamentally different from touching their back. As dancers, we typically don't analyze movements in terms of narrative—we look at qualities: What shapes do we create? What's the connection between dancers? What's the effort quality? We approach it from an anatomical or muscular perspective. The quality changes if the touch is caressing or hostile. I was fortunately not trained in an environment where you need to do everything regardless of comfort and boundaries.

One major difference is that improvisation is generally discouraged in intimacy coordination—everything should be set. Movements are predetermined, and actors know each step. Coming from dance, however, I see value in allowing actors to improvise to discover their own movement material and deepen their character understanding. Improvisation isn't inherently inappropriate for intimacy coordination—the question is where, when and how it occurs.

It needs to happen in a space where people feel safe. With structured improvisation, there's a framework within which people can feel secure enough to be free.

These fields are close yet very different, which doesn't necessarily make working in both easier.

Could you elaborate on how you combine intimacy and choreography in your work?

Usually, these are two separate roles: you work either as a choreographer or as an intimacy coordinator. However, they influence each other.

I generally view myself as either choreographer or intimacy coordinator within a project. While these roles don't blur during a project, I do adapt methods between them. Nevertheless, maintaining both roles simultaneously is challenging. An intimacy coordinator typically functions as an intermediary between director and actors—or choreographer and dancers. Having separate individuals for these roles is preferable. You might combine them out of necessity in small-budget projects, but ideally, you want an additional person to ensure safety.

In my choreographic work, I've always tried to be sensitive toward dancers and performers, never forcing them into anything and being specific about what I'm seeking while respecting their boundaries. Now, with background in intimacy coordination, I

place even more emphasis on this approach. I communicate more beforehand about what will happen, even during improvisation when we're exploring material. I'm more open and direct about potential developments.

When working as an intimacy coordinator, especially in larger productions, I set aside my choreographic mindset. However, in projects with more time—like theatre or student films—where you can bring the crew together before plotting a scene, it's beneficial to incorporate choreographic and/or improvisational methods for example to generate movement material. This helps performers connect with their bodies and get to know each other through movement rather than conversation.
I would call this a "chemistry exchange"—they familiarize themselves with each other's movements without necessarily touching. In these moments, I maintain my choreographic freedom before structuring for the specific scene. So, the roles influence each other, but I generally try to keep them separate.

Have you adapted existing guidelines from intimacy coordination with dance? Or have you created new ones?

In Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, there aren't official guidelines yet. We typically use SAG-AFTRA guidelines, which cover both working procedures and educational standards. England has developed some as well.

Here, we're still working to adapt guidelines to each country's context, as some aspects don't translate well to our film industry. For instance, we have fewer people on set—one person often handles multiple roles—compared to the U.S., where responsibilities are more compartmentalized.

As for adapting guidelines to dance projects, it really depends on the project, as each is unique. If the project's content already addresses intimacy, violence, or sexual violence, it's inherently physical, which differs from working with an underlying script.

In live performance, there's typically more preparation and rehearsal time. The teams are smaller and budgets lower, but there's more communication among different departments—costume, choreography, directing, etc. That's a clear advantage, providing time to explore movement qualities that support roles or create specific moods.

In film, we follow protocols like conducting risk assessments for each intimate scene to communicate risks and strategies to prevent trauma or boundary violations. While we might do this for a theatre play, it's challenging for dance since we usually develop scenes progressively rather than having them predetermined. You can't perform a risk assessment without knowing what content will emerge—unless you can anticipate potential risk areas. We also create nudity agreements in film, confirming the agreed

exposed body parts, positions etc. But in dance, without predetermined scenes, this becomes difficult.

For dance or experimental work, I'd need to accompany the entire rehearsal process. The pre-scene check-ins we do in film might become morning and post-lunch boundary checks in dance, since things may evolve throughout the day. In film or theatre, boundary checks might identify specific areas ("I don't want to be touched on my shoulder"), but if the shoulder isn't involved in the scene, it's not relevant. In dance, we might not know which body parts will be involved, necessitating broader boundary checks before each rehearsal block.

It's a continuous adaptation process, as dance has unique characteristics within performing arts. Touch isn't easily defined in dance. As a choreographer I might develop movement material through improvisation—thematic exploration and group work that may involve touch, either spontaneously or through my suggestion.

It's not feasible to fully adapt film or theatre guidelines to dance, but we can establish parameters at the beginning of each day: "This is what we're exploring today. It might include these elements. Do you have concerns? Are there things you'd prefer not to do? Are there emotional aspects already intense for you?" Some of this would ideally be addressed during auditioning, with dancers acknowledging what the project entails and their comfort level.

At day's end in film, we practice "de-roling"—stepping out of character and returning to one's personal identity. In dance, we often work without specific roles, so dancers might feel very much themselves after a session, having discovered individual movement material rather than portraying someone else. It's quite the opposite experience.

Still, these various steps provide a framework for adaptation into choreographic contexts, determining which elements remain relevant and which don't. Each project requires its own approach.

What have been your biggest discoveries around intimacy—whether methodological approaches or artistic findings?

I wouldn't say I've made one dramatic discovery, but rather observations about certain developments. What's happening now represents a positive shift toward fairer, more inclusive, and diverse working environments.

As contemporary dancers, we often work collectively already. Now the film industry is attempting to become more humane. I can apply much of what I've learned during 20-25 years in the independent dance scene—how to work collectively, communicate

without confrontation, and ensure people feel safe and respected. These are skills we've already cultivated.

What led me to become an intimacy coordinator was observing that suddenly there's a shift to a different physical aesthetic. There's a shift to greater naturalness in the bodies, not just in sex scenes but how bodies are shown. There's a shift toward more authenticity and responsibility towards the body. Some directors have long worked this way, but now the body might carry more storytelling responsibility—the narrative isn't conveyed solely through dialogue.

With good works explicit nudity isn't necessary; effective storytelling emerges through movement and its qualities. This has always fascinated me and motivated my transition to intimacy direction—trusting the body more than words.

What have been the biggest challenges in your work with intimacy?

The entire field is challenging and competitive but one challenge is stepping back. As a head of department, you must serve the director's vision. That can be difficult because choreographers aren't accustomed to this position, and dancers—ideally—aren't either. Dancers ideally work with choreographers in ways that value their creative input. While intimacy coordination remains highly creative, ultimately you're providing a service.

Another challenge—perhaps also a discovery—is that intimacy coordination deals with simulation: simulated intimacy, simulated violence. In contemporary dance, we rarely work with simulation. We seek authentic expression and connection between people through movement and presence. I need to remain mindful of this distinction.

I can pursue authenticity during improvisation or character exploration as an intimacy coordinator, but once a scene is blocked, it becomes technical: "Place your hand here, walk there, say this line." It becomes mechanical and plain. The emotional dimension typically returns only when actors feel free to explore within the established structure. This contrast between simulation and authenticity creates quite a divide.

What do you identify as the most intriguing unexplored potential for combining intimacy coordination with choreography? What future possibilities do you see?

That's challenging to answer. I believe the potential for film or theatre is that performances become more intense, authentic, and natural. Different body representations emerge than what media has long presented. This isn't entirely unexplored, but it's one of the greatest potentials—a genuine shift in representation.

You can already observe on streaming platforms that body diversity is increasing. The physicality of women, for example, is evolving—it's no longer exclusively young, conventionally beautiful 25-year-olds. Intimacy coordination accelerates this transformation, which is tremendously positive. It allows us to experience more diverse, natural, and less digitally-modified bodies.

Another area for further exploration is what I mentioned earlier about improvisation—that it needn't be strictly separated from intimacy coordination. It has its place, particularly at the beginning, though not once a scene is blocked. I wouldn't have unfamiliar actors improvise certain scenarios, but structured movement exploration—even briefly—can dramatically impact their connection. You can spot it so easily. If there has been a movement exploration let it be only 10 minutes before you start rehearsing the lines. It's such a big difference because the ice is broken. The people have looked into each other's eyes, they've seen each other move, they have maybe laughed. Elements that immediately translate. Some intimacy coordinators with movement backgrounds incorporate this approach.

Is there something it could contribute specifically to choreography?

Also in the performance arts, #MeToo cases have occurred. Boundaries become very blurred—what the choreographer wants versus what you're willing to provide, complicated by your desire to remain with the company. These issues exist in our field too.

Intimacy coordination is beginning to be implemented in drama and film schools. I've been invited to conduct workshops for companies as well, so integration is underway. But further progress is needed regarding awareness of boundaries, working methods, and limitations. Everything I've mentioned exists already—I just believe these practices should be expanded.

My current artistic research centers on aesthetic questions—how intimacy work and our methods can transform our aesthetic experience. We're currently losing the "live" aspect of performance. Consider social media, TikTok videos, or the COVID period—increasingly, experiences occur on screens. While some companies have rebounded, small theatres continue to struggle. The live body possesses a unique presence, and through intimacy coordination or strong choreographic work, we can revitalize this quality.

This can bring digital presence closer to live experience again. But I'm interested in how aesthetics can evolve to generate visceral responses even through screens—without resorting to shock value, as films sometimes do. I'm asking: How can subtle movement material evoke similar responses?