

A Repertoire of Touch in Participatory Choreography

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Scenario one: The audience experiences choreography by watching.
Touch is performed at the audience.

Dancers touch their own bodies
 the bodies of fellow dancers
 the audience's inner world via visual reception.

Scenario two: The audience experiences choreography by moving their own body.
Touch is performed with the audience.

Dancers touch their own bodies
 the bodies of fellow dancers
 the audience's inner world via physical proximity.



Touch Encounter between Vera Tussing and the Audience in *Mazing* (2016) © Alessandra Rocchetti

In both scenarios, the dancers require skills of communication and negotiation.

Yet, whereas in scenario one, such communication and negotiation is cultivated between performers throughout rehearsals, in scenario two, the touch encounters with an audience rely on little shared history and cannot be rehearsed in the same way.

To prepare for such participatory choreographies, performers develop a repertoire of touch and learn – in the words of choreographer Vera Tussing – ‘to navigate “moments of touch” in as informed a way as possible’. This essay thinks through the practice of

[Vera Tussing](#) (DE/BE), who has committed herself to participatory choreographies that ‘unstage touch’ and [Katrien Oosterlinck](#) (BE), whose participatory choreographies mediate touch via choreographic objects, i.e. objects with the potency of movement.

In the work of Vera and Katrien, touch is a tool going beyond the differentiation between ‘contact’ and ‘no contact’. Touch becomes a graze, grasp, push, pull, rub, tap, strike, caress, squeeze, pinch, knead, catch, or release. Its relations manifest among humans but also between human and non-human elements. These tactile manifestations emerge from the touches’

movement, e.g. approaching, withdrawing, moving in parallel,
intensities, e.g. tender, direct, tentative,
and *rhythms*, e.g. slow, quick paced, in reiterative patterns (Egert 2020, 1).

A variety in touch is the basis of a repertoire of touch.

A repertoire of touch is the range of learned gestures and qualities of touch performers mobilise in the moment of a performance to address the (small) variations in audience response.

a store of somatic knowledge about the arsenal of options performers rely on to respond to the situation at hand.

a familiar base that allows them to combine and recombine, to reconfigure and discover new variations of touch which are appropriate for that meeting.

Although a repertoire of touch is a series of learned movements, intensities, and rhythms, touch is a technique of *production* rather than *reproduction*. The expertise of using touch as a tool cannot be reduced to the repetition of learned actions. Instead, in participatory choreographies, touch is used ‘to move the participation beyond a mechanical repetitious experience to one that is subtly personalised’ (Hogarth, Bramley, and Howson-Griffiths 2018, 199).

To establish a subtly personalised experience, the performer relies on ‘tactual probing’ (Mattens 2017). Touch as *tactual probing* explores external bodies and allows for ‘felt negotiations’ (Tussing in Kann 2017). As such, touch not only serves a sense of immersion but goes beyond its immersive dimensions. Touch goes beyond *tactility*, i.e. the awareness of sensations of one’s body, to invite audiences to make contact with their own bodies *and* enter in communication with others.

Touch can become an invitation,
 a way to say hello,
 to challenge the audience,
 to support them or halt them
 to explore objects,
 to build, to move, to play.



Touch Encounters in *Tactile Talk* (2021) © Lisa Matthys

In their minute differences, touches gain a communicative value, which contributes to the formation of audience participation. In the work of Vera and Katrien, audience participation is an artistic medium. This artistic medium originates in audience-performer interplay. is dynamic and changes continuously. shapes different modes of conduct.

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To allow different modes of conduct to appear, the performer develops the skills to facilitate felt negotiations. Such facilitation entails the ability to have a conversation with the situation. The performer requires an overall alertness to read the situation, to judge what the audience needs, to adapt, and to shift themselves to respond adequately to the unfolding pattern of action.

To acquire the ability to respond appropriately to each new situation, a performer engages in numerous touch settings. Crucial to such settings, says Vera, is the presence of people who have access to a different sense apparatus. She explains: 'there are as many embodied experiences as there are people' and 'our way of knowing only counts for a fraction of a sea of possibilities' (Tussing 2020). Getting more familiar with this sea of possibilities expands a performer's embodied knowledge beyond their own set-up.

To this end, performers not only engage in settings where they meet peers – such as rehearsals and training events – but also in settings that accommodate people with a wider variety in sense apparatus – such as playtests, participatory performances, and applied projects.

According to Katrien, practicing touch with different people allows a performer to learn about resistance: 'How do different people receive touch? How do they refuse touch? How to deal with that? That is the greatest interest in training'. Katrien explains that an audience can only have an experience within their own limits.

If the performer listens to this limit, they activate the audience
and set the medium of audience participation in motion.
it allows for a situation
'in which all sorts of other things can happen'.

If the performer disregards this limit, they decide on their own what an audience should receive. there is no communication.

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Negotiation in *The Palm of Your Hand #1* (2014) by Vera Tussing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbcuIcqKFic>

Katrien's 'listening to the limits' resonates with Vera's attention to consent and boundary setting. To train establishing, exploring, and communicating consent, Vera identifies four modes of consent: Gaze, Spoken, Gestural, and Felt. In training, the performer learns to undulate between these four modes. Vera describes the modes as follows:

***"Gaze.** When approaching an audience member, what can you read by looking at them?*

***Spoken.** What reply do you receive when you simply ask, 'Do you want to give me The Palm Of Your Hand'?*

***Gestural.** In many cases, simply lifting your hand will invite the other to give a gestural reply. However, it is a tricky one as few of us can really resist that invitation, even if we might prefer to.*

***Felt.** Many audiences I have experienced will easily comply with proposed ideas. Sometimes it is only in the moment of touching that you can feel the other and realise they are not entirely comfortable. I often propose to see what happens if you increase the distance between yourself and the audience member – creating a space where they have the power to re-initiate the touch if they choose it."*

Vera explains that her practice always allows room for an audience member to say 'no' to a proposal and still meaningfully experience the work:

"We had a very distinctive response from an audience member at one of our shows of The Palm of Your Hand in Amsterdam. The audience member stood slightly back from the rest of the audience, with crossed arms – for a show that invites the audience over and over again to give the palm of your hand. Several people commented on this person, nervously pointing out that they must have not enjoyed the experience at all. It turned out to be the opposite. They approached me after the show and told me how much it had meant to them. They had simply chosen to experience it in their own way".

With regards to her work, Katrien is adamant that saying 'no' is an act of engaging in dialogue and an act of taking responsibility. To Katrien, touch encounters are about communication, which is a state in which both parties are activated and responsible. Even though there is a giver (i.e. performer) and a receiver (i.e. audience), both parties are actively engaged in dialogue. Thus, in participatory choreographies, the choice to look at touch is also audience participation.

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Communication in *Tactile Talk* by Katrien Oosterlinck © Lisa Matthys
<https://vimeo.com/690892442>

Even though both parties are responsible, sense, communicate, and negotiate, the performer and the audience differ in power. Vera: 'In the initial nervousness of performing, many performers might forget that they are in a position of power when proposing an interaction with an audience. This needs to be considered with all responses'.

As such, negotiation not only entails probing the limits of the audience. For the performer, it also involves questioning their own position. Katrien elucidates:

At the same time the performer asks the audience (non-verbally): 'Where are you?', they ask themselves 'Where am I?'; 'Where are we going? Can we find each other in proximity or do we step away from each other? Is that good, too?' We question where we stand at any moment, continuously. We question our positions and dispositions because we want something to emerge in the moment".

By developing a repertoire of touch and the ability to hold a conversation with the situation, Vera and Katrien imbue their work with principles of communication and negotiation, that evoke a culture of questioning and conjure an aesthetic of call and response.

Notes

All quotes of Vera Tussing and Katrien Oosterlinck without a reference were provided by the artists in July 2022.

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Biography

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