

Un-Staging Tactility in Conversation

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What happens before we touch? What memories of past touches do we carry within us? *Un-Staging Tactility* is a promenade performance incorporating dance, immersive choreography, sculpture, sound art and light. The audience is guided by three performers (Helen D'Haenens, Raphael Philipe Damasceno Ferreira de Moura, Christine Sollie) through several stage-worlds throughout the entire theatre building, each exploring a different aspect of the sense of touch and the multiple meanings it can carry.

Our sense of touch is woven through with desire, fear, pleasure, disgust, comfort, danger. Tactility is by definition a contingent phenomenon, defining our relations with each other and the world. Because it is so loaded with meaning, touch requires careful negotiation, and everyone comes with their own history of touch. Ultimately, what comes before touch is us; and what comes before us is our story of touch. We are, all, the sum of our touches.

A conversation between Vera Tussing (choreography/direction) & Sebastian Kann (dramaturge).

Sebastian Kann: I'd like to start with a question about the title. 'Un-staging Tactility': I'm trying to wrap my head around what it means to 'un-stage' something. What does 'un-staging tactility' mean to you?

Vera Tussing: The initial idea for the piece was to create a kind of tactile playground. I imagined the audience moving through a space where they would encounter different tactile stations. I wanted to alleviate some of the performance pressure that you get with doing participation in the theater space. The architecture of the stage, exposed before a sea of onlookers, intensifies the experience of being watched. Instead of turning the audience into performers, I wanted to give space to their tactile experiences. To me, that meant 'un-staging' these tactile encounters.

Then came covid and things got turned on their head. To keep on working, I had to develop a whole series of new scores without direct body-to-body touch. I had already been thinking about the 'before' of touch, but covid really brought that aspect into focus.

Kann: The 'before' of touch?

Tussing: Yes, what comes before touch? I mean that in two ways, actually. What do we, as individuals or as a collective, bring to each tactile encounter? Our histories of touch, all of the meanings that touch has for us, and so forth. But also: what happens in the moment right before we touch another person, as we enter their personal space?

Kann: Touch is so often equated to concreteness and presence. Like when we say, for example, that "the tension between them was palpable", or that you could "cut it with a knife,; we're saying that some immaterial feeling was really there, that it was so intense that it became something like an object you could touch. In other words, if you can touch it, it's here and now, not a projection, a fantasy, a hallucination, or a memory.

It's interesting to think about touch instead as something that has these multiple temporalities: as a projection into the future, as in a touch which is coming but not here yet, but also as a portal into the past of memory and imprint.

Tussing: Yes, there's the temporal 'before', but for me the spatial 'before' is equally important. In this creation, we were thinking about the 'before' of touch in relation to the kinesphere: your 'personal space', the negative space that surrounds the body. The kinesphere is basically defined by the limits of your reach. If you hold your arms out and rotate your torso left to right, you're feeling out your kinesphere.

In my previous works with tactility and audience participation, like *Mazing* (2016) and *The Palm of Your Hand* (2014), the kinesphere became really central. We were coming up to audience members and making physical contact with them. It's a very clear feeling when you get into someone's personal space. For me, that's when the processes of consent kick in. How do you enter someone's personal space? What protocols of communication do we need to make people feel comfortable touching and being touched, or indeed to enable people to say 'no' to touch, especially touch coming from strangers and in public? Gesture, eye contact, verbal questions: entering another person's kinesphere, for me, requires communication and checking in.

Kinespheres are easy to feel but hard to see. How to make the kinesphere itself appear for the audience? In this piece, there's an extended section in which the dancers move at high speed alongside each other, mostly in unison, holding their own space while simultaneously needing to slot in with each other. Choreographically, unison is a great tool to explore the tensions of fitting in, of holding and giving space while remaining on a beat. It's a constant struggle around space, actually. By varying the same phrase over and over I'm hoping the dancer's sensitivity to the kinesphere begins to become a theme for the spectator.

Kann: There's also the sticks...

Tussing: Yes! The dancers in this section are holding sticks which act like markers. As they swing the sticks, they're tracing the far limits of their kinespheres. There are actually objects throughout the work that help us visualize the kinesphere. Not only the sticks, but also the cloth we ask the audience to poke their heads through, which turns the space between us into a literal elastic fabric. Or the large curved tubes at the beginning which the dancers use to make a collective sphere, a kind of collective 'personal bubble'.

Kann: It's interesting that your work with touch has led you to all of these objects. Not to repeat myself, but I find it interesting that touch is usually imagined as so direct, but that here you're working with so much mediation: touch which happens through a cloth, for example, or by poking each other with sticks or tubes.

Tussing: I guess that the 'un-staging' that the show is performing is related to these assumptions about touch: that it's good and that everyone wants it; that it's unmediated, direct, and present; that it means skin touching skin.

Kann: What kind of reactions do you get to all this mediation? I feel like people have an emotional connection to the promise of direct contact. As if a 'return to the tactile' would be a way out of the alienation of digitally-mediated society, for example. Do you encounter annoyance or resistance when you burst this bubble?

Tussing: Mediation definitely doesn't bother me. But I have noticed irritation in others. I'm thinking for example about the way verbal language mediates touch in *The Palm of Your Hand* and *Mazing*. I can see that audience members are grateful for being put at ease in a situation that might otherwise be confronting or stressful, and when I talk about verbal consent and other mediations of touch with audiences I'm often met with nodding heads. It's performers who tend at first not to want to admit to a touched encounter being uncomfortable for them, as though our sensitivity to what touch means for us got trained away in the process of becoming a 'professional'.

Sometimes I get the feeling that the thought of mediation has just been a mismatch for the dance field, at least in the recent past. It conflicts with a demand to always deliver, on the part of the dancer, and to always be hungry to receive, on the part of the spectator. Whereas I actually enjoy performance as a process of meeting and exchanging with the audience, with all of the tensions, impossibilities, and stuttering that implies. I think there is something in professional dance education in the Central and Western European context that historically has not prioritized consent as an ongoing process in dance performance. But I also see that changing rapidly among dancers I meet now, who are in their late teens and at the beginning of their professional education.

I have also noticed that the people who show the most irritation around ideas of mediation or processes of consent are people who might not be the ones who have really ever had to think about consent: people in empowered positions, who have a certain kind of confidence that comes with social privilege, ability, or whatever else. Or the people who are used to leading the action, like choreographers and teachers.

There is adrenaline in the performance situation. So sometimes dancers, flying high, will have a tendency to just 'deliver' touch, without wondering why, how, or what it means. If I sign up for a tango class, for example, I know from the start that touch is going to be involved. But that's not usually the case in the context where my performances happen. So we need to find a way to communicate when getting into close contact. Touch is not simple and direct: it contains all of these meanings and dynamics. By asking for consent, you evoke all of the temporal 'before' that's compressed in touch: the personal histories which make touch meaningful in specific ways for individuals and in a society. While in dance that sometimes passes under the radar, I want to name the mediation of touch and work with it.

Kann: By naming the mediation, you make it discussable, thinkable, feel-able. It makes me think about scoring. In dance, we're often working with scores which delimit what's allowed and not allowed in the performance, which help us make improvisational decisions and shape the dance as it unfolds. The score is

kind of like a set of rules which mediates the dancer's encounter with the dance. When we make dance, we actively design those rules. As opposed to everyday life, where our relations are definitely mediated by rules, but those rules are tacit, difficult to identify, discuss, or change. Is choreography itself a mediation of touch?

Tussing: Maybe. But let's not forget that mediation is just the soil the dance grows in. The score is not the point. When I discuss my work, I have a habit of talking a lot about the preparation phase. But the preparation is just that: a preparation. Consent is not the only thing my work is about – it's just a precondition. It's there in order to allow something else to happen. That something is not something I can phrase as an opinion or a point of view. It's a sensory experience. This is what I hope emerges from the choreographic score: a space for sensing together.