

Un-staging Tactility — Vera Tussing

The art of (touch)

Vera Tussing does exactly what she promises with *Un-staging Tactility*: in four parts, the performers and the audience explore what touch is and what its conditions are. Cautiously we get closer to each other, until we collide. Those who participate discover something about the others as well as about themselves.

I have a confession to make. I hate most touching. I flinch when someone gets too close, shudder at festivals and crowded buses. I loved the one and a half meter society, the covid bubble was a relief. So I was reluctant to accept the 'immersive experience' around tactility that Vera Tussing promised with *Un-staging Tactility*. Had she not put the focus on 'what precedes touch', or the moment before touch, I would not have gone. But in the end, I completely voluntarily shared a sheet with at least 20 people. How on earth did that happen? A reconstruction.

Helen D'Haenens, Raphael Philipe Damasceno Ferreira de Moura and Christine Sollie wait for their audience in the middle of a small room. They wear blue outfits and support a construction made of neon pink and orange bars. Chairs are arranged in a circle around them, and on each chair is a kind of stress ball: a bag - sometimes cylindrical, sometimes oval with jagged protrusions - containing plastic balls.

The three dancers let the sticks clatter to the ground and play a game of mikado, until three sticks remain. It is at once an apt portrayal of what Tussing is all about: watching intently and discovering what is possible leading up to touch. Then they lower themselves to the ground and a kind of mindfulness exercise begins. We are invited to stroke the object lying on our chair, squeeze it, fold it, etc. Whereas in mindfulness that touching is a means of directing your attention, here it is an end in itself. We are exploring what it is like to feel. Or maybe the exercise here is also a means: while squeezing and stroking we get involved in the performance.

That involvement is partly lost as Damasceno and Sollie read out instructions from a phone. Does Tussing want to convey something about the distance technology creates? Does she want to illustrate how direct contact between people is replaced by touchscreens? Or does the mobile phone serve to record the performers' voices (at the end, they carry speakers in a crossbody bag from which the same text echoes)? However, we see no more than the performers looking at their text, which makes it come across as something unintentional.

While the audience continues to play with the stress ball, the dancers probe the space, exploring their spatiality. They measure the distance between their hands, stretch and bend their bodies. Then they curve the three remaining mikado sticks and hook the bows together. Cautiously, they move in all sorts of constellations, without the rods (or the dancers) touching each other. It is reminiscent of metal brainteasers - another great meditation tool - and of nineties Windows screen savers. Watching it is simultaneously relaxing and exciting: you almost expect a buzzer to go off if they do accidentally touch.

Such a confrontation fails to materialise: gently the dancers 'disengage' and leave the room. We too are guided to the next room. We exchange our touch object for a neon rod the size of our palm. The walk breaks the tension, but it immediately returns in the second hall. There, Sollie and Damasceno march back and forth, pushing an inflexible neon stick in front of them like a kind of cane for blind people. There is no question of cautious touching off here, however; the march looks tight and assertive. Industrial sounds and harsh blue lighting complete the authoritarian atmosphere. A beating is of course also touch.

D'Haenens joins in and a choreography of near-touch and mirroring follows to a soundtrack that would not be out of place in an action film. Repeatedly, the dancers draw a circle around themselves with the stick, as if delineating their 'bubble'. At the same time, that bubble changes with each movement; we

see how one person's space shrinks as the other takes up more space. The choreography echoes Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which states that our bodies are not in space, but towards space. We are tethered to our environment, moulding ourselves to that environment and to others. This bodily experience forms the basis of our consciousness. Tussing also refers to this when she talks about 'what precedes touch': where that bodily experience makes one person long for closeness, other bodies are scarred by diffidence or trauma, making touch a task or even something disgusting.

Those differences are exposed when the performers invite the audience to sit on the sides of the stage. They take hold of the bending sticks from the very beginning and extend them curved towards us. As they float the bows above knees and hands, they encourage a few audience members to touch them with the mini-stick between thumb and forefinger. Some sit rigidly, others waver or hold their rod ready as silently as possible, like a string waiting for a bow. Still others enthusiastically grasp the large rods with their hand, or stretch over their neighbour to join in.

After this interlude, the performers repeat the choreography from before, but now under soft, multi-coloured spotlights. Also, the three now touch each other directly for the first time. Sollie even lets D'Haenens climb on her shoulders. The dancers carry crossbody bags containing small speakers, which creakily repeat the words of the beginning: fold, caress, squeeze ... It seems to be a camouflaged mantra, which, together with the increasingly soft light, sets the stage for the apotheosis: yes, the 'shared sheet'.

D'Haenens, Sollie and Damasceno spread a grey cloth on the floor, with numerous holes in it through which a head can pass. First they invite a few people, then they themselves crawl to the centre of the cloth. The rest then follows, until a head peeps out of almost every hole. So I join in, against my normal inclination. The grey fabric clearly shows how the distance between me and the others increases and decreases. At the same time, the fabric connects us. Techno sounds fill the room and we move and let ourselves move. The more the light dims, the more I feel part of a whole. We are not used as performers, but are part of an undulating mass. Even a gentle collision here and there is not uncomfortable.

While undulating, I realise that my resistance has been transformed into openness. Through small steps - the stress ball exercise, the walk, the invitation to sit on stage - and indirect touch, I have been guided to this moment. The mirroring in the choreography made it feel natural to imitate the others. And because the performers touched each other directly in the last part, this 'sheet dance' feels like a small thing. Through Tussing's attention to consent and the careful construction, lighting and music of *Un-staging tactility*, I pushed my own limits. And with pleasure.