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Performing care on the borders of the self in *Tactility Studies: Pandemic distances* (review)

Tactility Studies: Pandemic distances. By *Tactility Studies*. Singapore: Objectifs—Centre for Photography and Film, 18 October 2020; six-hour participatory and durational performance

CORRIE TAN

Tactility Studies is a long-term performance project co-conceived by Singaporean theatre practitioner Chong Gua Khee and dance artist Bernice Lee. The project has grown out of their joint exploration of 'The-Body-As-Theatre', which establishes the body as a site and space for performance, a shapeshifting archive of memory and sensation. Since 2018, *Tactility Studies* has manifested as various participatory and intimate touch-centred performances, asking: What languages do our muscles and limbs speak? What kind of fluency exists in decoding the gestures and caresses of others? Each new branch of *Tactility Studies* seeks to generate affective discourses around touch and consent—and examines how touch can be both transgressive and reparative, pleasurable and profound. As the project's dramaturg, I have been struck by how deeply responsive this project is to the worlds we inhabit and its commitment to modelling an 'aesthetics of care' (Thompson 2015: 436) through 'kinesthetic empathy' (Foster 2011: 10).

This review addresses one of *Tactility Studies*' most recent activations, *Tactility Studies: Pandemic distances* (stylized as *TS:PD*¹), which took place over a six-hour period on 18 October 2020 at Objectifs—Centre for Photography and Film in

Singapore. The piece featured a solo performer bringing participants on a journey of tactile exploration and connection through gesture and movement. Commissioned as part of the exhibition *immaterial bodies*, *TS:PD* was one of the first live, in-person performance experiences to take place in Singapore following the easing of pandemic restrictions in the country. During the city-state's 2020 lockdown, Chong and Lee grappled with the possibility that *Tactility Studies* as they had imagined it would be rendered 'unperformable' because of the paranoia and pathologizing around touch, particularly between strangers, in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The restriction on the number of people who could gather in homes or public spaces in Singapore, as well as safe distancing guidelines and mandatory masking, comes under the country's COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act 2020, which many artists have come to regard as a form of social choreography—or even a performance score. In this vein, I read *TS:PD*'s gentle choreography of its participants as a shift away from the paranoid frenzy of 'moral contagion' that has come to characterize the peer policing of those who contravene restrictions laid out in the Act. Instead, *TS:PD*

moves towards a reparative stance that acknowledges how 'such contagion occurs only inasmuch as individuals already have a tendency towards particular actions or feelings within themselves. The crowd does not reverse the individual's psychological being, only catalyses and intensifies it' (Gotman 2017: 14). *TS:PD* demonstrates how a gathering of bodies might collectively communicate a kind of kinaesthetic generosity through gesture and action, and how careful facilitation may strive to recalibrate and even repair the complex imbrication of touch with fear, contagion and isolation.

Chong and Lee's practice is often underscored by their commitment to render care work both visible and legible. At *TS:PD* they introduced themselves as 'hygiene and safety personnel' while dressed in personal protective equipment (PPE), including a gown, mask and gloves. They welcomed each participant into the space and invited them to remove their shoes and wipe down the soles of their feet, then offered basins of warm water for participants to soak their feet in—reframing repetitive gestures of cleaning and sanitization as gestures of self and bodily care. Following this induction, participants walked across a textured footpath into the

¹ The *TS:PD* team: Chong Gua Khee and Bernice Lee (co-directors), Lam Dan Fong (production manager), Corrie Tan (dramaturg), Bib Mockram (performer and visual/set design), Adele Goh (performer) and SAtheCollective (music/sound design).

main performance space. For the duration of the work, the unmasked performers remained behind a series of portable room dividers covered in transparent plastic sheeting, reminiscent of folding hospital screens. Masked participants, however, were free to move around the space and interact with small installations: gleaming marbles on rattan trays, or bolts of fabric and bubble wrap. The rotating performers, Adele Goh and Bib Mockram, found non-verbal ways to make acquaintance with participants, especially those who chose to sit in a designated chair directly in front of them. Very often this involved mirroring how the participant chose to occupy the chair: legs crossed, palms on knees, shoulders hunched, leaning forward or sprawled back. While any kind of choreography, as Susan Leigh Foster argues, might contain 'a kinesthesia, a designated way of experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn, summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it', *TS:PD* made an explicit cultivation of kinaesthetic empathy (2011: 2).

The *TS:PD* performance score was porous enough for performers to intervene, react or adjust their physicality to connect with the emotive and affective frequencies of participants, such that participants could engage with the performance at their own pace and as much or as little as desired. I sometimes observed participants mimicking one another: whether consciously or subconsciously, whether this was massaging one's arms or stroking one's hair, and whether or not

they were in the designated chair or in other corners of the room. There were those who engaged in extended physical dialogues with the performer, often testing their proximity to the barrier and how the performer would respond if they came close or retreated halfway across the room.

Previous branches of *Tactility Studies* performances have involved extensive skin-on-skin contact between performer and participant. As in Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters*, *Tactility Studies* asks us to think of our skin not as what contains our bodies, but what opens out our bodies to other bodies and other encounters. But in a post-pandemic era, how might one establish a sense of 'inter-embodiment', an embodiment that is 'the social experience of dwelling with other bodies' (Ahmed 2000: 47), when the border of the skin is one we cannot cross, or even approach? *TS:PD* mines the 'response-ability' of tactile conversations by sensitizing participants to their bodies and dermic borders (Schneider and Ruprecht 2017). During one of Bib's sessions at *TS:PD*, a woman sat in the designated chair with a tiny infant strapped to her chest; all that was visible was the tiny scallop of the child's ear and wispy hair. The sleeping child limited the woman's movement, so she initially confined her movement to other, unoccupied limbs. As Bib mirrored the woman's gestures, the woman began to enact small performative gestures on her sleeping child, stroking and caressing them lightly,

then running a finger down their spine. It was a stunning moment to witness, and I could see the woman connecting with her child in a public space in a way she had not expected, and reconfiguring her sensorial relationship between her own body and the body of her baby.

Gesture, choreography, empathy and care are tightly bound up with one another in *TS:PD*, which demonstrates that care, through the relationality of gesture, may be recognized, repeated and reciprocated by those who receive it. At several points during the work, participants approached the physical barrier separating them and the performer(s) and pressed their palms (and on one occasion, their forehead) to the screen as a gesture of thanks. The warmth from their hands and breath left small circles of mist on the plastic. The performers, who had been acting as receptacles for the anxious gestures (leg bouncing, skin picking, fidgeting) of these participants, were now part of a larger affective and connective tissue being reconstructed through acts of giving and receiving. Each of us in the room, separated for months by a choreography designed to avoid the contagion of a virus, were now co-creating a choreography designed to cross-contaminate one another with the viral replication of care.

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Intellectual responsibility and eco-aesthetic existentialism: Experimental kinetic dramaturgies from Flanders

Machine Made Silence: The art of Kris Verdonck. Edited by Peter Eckersall and Kristof van Baarle. Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2020; pp. 192 + illus.

The Choreopolitics of Alain Platel's les ballets C de la B: Emotions, gestures, politics. Edited by Christel Stalpaert, Guy Cools and Hildegard De Vuyst. London and New York, NY: Methuen Drama, 2020; pp. 280 + 34 illus.

PETER M. BOENISCH

These two recent books collate the critical debates on two very different idiosyncratic performance-makers from Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Kris Verdonck's dystopian 'posthuman landscapes', as Maike Bleeker describes them in *Machine Made Silence*, are populated by motors, machines, at times even invasive animal species, which afflict spectators and, when not entirely dispensing of human performers, mostly some solo outcasts on stage. Alain Platel's highly collective and 'alterkinetic' choreographies, to use Kéline Gotman's apt term from *The Choreopolitics of Alain Platel*, meanwhile, could not exude a more humanist utopia. Reading both collections in parallel, it becomes evident, though, that their work shares an artistic deep structure: they respond to what Carl Lavery, speaking of Verdonck, calls an 'eco-aesthetic dispositif' in tune with the problematics of the Anthropocene but equally the socio-political disorientation that the present global situation inflicts on the Western, and specifically, the European hegemonic universalism. With their non-

narrative, non-representational dramaturgies, the artists, also representing two generations of Flemish performance making (Platel born in 1958, Verdonck in 1974), both rely on kinetic, materialist affects—triggered by bodies in Platel's work, by objects in Verdonck's—that challenge conventional analytic perspectives. Both volumes also further add to a growing number of publications jointly edited by artists, their collaborators and scholars in shared attempts to articulate and document such innovative, original performance principles.

Kristof van Baarle, who followed the late Marianne Van Kerkhoven as Verdonck's dramaturg, coedited *Machine Made Silence* with Peter Eckersall. The book's three sections are dedicated to Verdonck's notorious machines, but also the landscapes and thirdly the existential dramaturgic 'zero dimension' of his temporal coordinates. Authored by academics, collaborators, performers, the two dramaturgs and Verdonck himself, the texts keep returning to the same performance installations, so that a complex understanding of this

unique oeuvre emerges even for readers who have not been able to experience these works live. Local voices that show an intimate familiarity with this body of work from the outset are productively complemented by more remote academic responses by researchers from the US, the UK and Australia, whose contributions also usefully contextualize a range of secondary sources they introduce and draw on. It quickly becomes apparent that Verdonck's pieces never fetishize, but instead fathom, technology's existential impact on human agency—starting with the artist himself relinquishing control over his performance work. As Charlotte de Somviele aptly notes in her contribution, his machines 'couldn't care less' (p. 30). In extension, the somewhat anti-spectacular, often rather dark and wayward productions also challenge an objectifying spectatorial gaze and desire, which nevertheless still shine through some articles that all too easily humanize the machines, speak of their 'head', see them 'dance' or describe their 'clown like' behaviour. At the same time, one comes to grasp Verdonck's