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Necessary Movements

Janelle Proulx

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Necessary Movements

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of
Master of Fine Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University

by
Janelle Proulx
MFA, Photography & Film
Virginia Commonwealth University
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Director: Paul Thulin,
Graduate Director, Photography and Film

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Table of Contents

I Abstract	4
II Introduction	5
III Background: Moving Beyond The Photograph	5
IV Thesis: REVERB	11
V Spatial Influence	13
VI Solitude and Meetings	17
VII Touch and Psychology	18
VIII Touch Art	19
IX Manipulation and Facilitation	28
X Conclusion	30
XI Bibliography	31

Abstract

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By Janelle Proulx, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Major Director: Paul Thulin, Graduate Director, Photography and Film

This thesis follows the trajectory of my artistic practice over the past two years which has led me to the creation of the installation *REVERB*. While incorporating performance, installation, and video into my modes of creation, I've likewise expanded my conceptual research regarding the influential capabilities of touch, gesture, and environment. By focusing on the relationship of *REVERB* to a broader discussion regarding these themes, I hope to situate the work among its art, cultural, and scientific referents.

Introduction

My graduate studies have witnessed many shifts and forward movements—the emphasis here being on movement. This thesis will speak to the trajectories and pitfalls of my creative process as I have moved from a photographic practice to one that has expanded to include video, installation, and performance. It will primarily address the way that I arrived at utilizing performance in many of my works and will situate my thesis exhibition, *REVERB*, within an art, cultural, and conceptual context. As I have come to favor direct, live engagements with viewers, it has become clear that the conceptual heart of my art practice lends itself best to this kind of direct contact.

Background: Moving Beyond The Photograph

I came to Virginia Commonwealth University with an exclusively photography-based portfolio, but I have been experimenting heavily over the past two years by crossing mediums. My interest in attending graduate school for photography was coupled with a desire to expand into video, which became an immediate endeavor after arriving in Richmond. I was curious to see how the subjects I was already photographing would translate into moving images since they addressed ideas that involved longevity and relationships. My primary video investigations were of subtle gestures that would transition in meaning with small modifications. These videos were helpful as an introductory investigation to my interest in gesture, which was prevalent in my photographic work prior to graduate school (fig. 1) and which has carried through to my thesis. However, these first videos repeatedly felt unsuccessful as finished works. I view them now as functioning as studies rather than as finalized pieces for exhibition. These explorations with the dimensions of movement and duration inherent to video have created a strong foundation for further steps in the creative process leading up to my thesis. By focusing on these two

characteristics of video and by reading cinema theory, I built a conceptual understanding of how the elements of time and space function within the moving image. However, something still was not quite allowing my ideas to be fully conveyed. It was only after reading Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* that what was lacking became clear to me. One of Bergson's more compelling passages is his dictum "the more immediate the reaction is compelled to be, the more must perception resemble mere contact; and the complete process of perception and reaction can then hardly be distinguished from a mechanical impulsion followed by a necessary movement."¹ Reading this immediately propelled me to incorporate physical presence and interaction into my work. The desire to generate a "mechanical impulsion" resonated with my interest in sociology and environmental psychology. I had been researching the way that hidden or subliminal environmental and social forces influence behavior and this passage by Bergson reinforced the potential for physical proximity to produce great affect. Rather than creating a representation of something I was driven to create an experience.

At the time of this revelation, my works were developing around an exploration of empathy. In one particular project, I created a video portrait of a woman outside at night where she was staring off screen, her expression showing that she was being potentially moved by what was out of frame (fig. 2). I wanted to determine if someone could relate to her and develop a sense of wonder and empathy. This was also my first attempt at exhibiting a video pulled off the wall. By showing the video projected onto the back of a piece of mylar that fluttered as you walked by it, I was experimenting with a floating video's potential to generate more power and a sense of liveliness than a physically static presentation. While these studies seem rather rudimentary now, they were necessary explorations into the manipulation of physical space to generate impact and

¹ Henri Bergson, Nancy Margaret Paul, and William Scott Palmer, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 22.

operated as fundamental points of consideration since I wanted content, concept, and form to co-exist in a way that allowed them to enrich one another. After reading *Matter and Memory*, however, it no longer felt like enough to be making quiet works with minimal change, attempting to see how little would be needed to create an empathetic impulse. Instead I wanted to run straight to the source of it all: real-time, direct human interaction.

This revelation informed my candidacy exhibition piece which was entitled *Mere Contact* after Bergson's quotation. This work involved a projection of two men backyard wrestling that was viewable only through a small mirror on an opposite wall (fig. 3). When multiple people were in the space, the limited line of sight for the projection required a negotiation among the viewers. This intentional limitation yielded my favorite outcome of the work: an intimate space that people co-occupied. People were required to acknowledge one another through their apologies for their inadvertent physical contact. The work counteracted typical delineations of "personal space" in favor of curiosity and shared experience. There was also an element of verbal sharing since the video was difficult to detect unless you walked far enough into the room. During the exhibition's opening, visitors would discover the video and tell their friends, inviting them to come see. I also experienced this while monitoring the gallery hours during subsequent days. Sometimes visitors would walk into the space a bit confused and I would encourage them to walk further. An emphatic "Oh!" would be exclaimed. Witnessing this moment of discovery was something that provided me immense satisfaction.

While *Mere Contact* was running, I simultaneously orchestrated another work titled *All Persons Fictitious*. In this piece, two paid actors (one male and one female) conversed in the nine by sixteen foot room constructed for *Mere Contact* and performed a cyclical argument (fig. 4). This piece was performed on two separate occasions for three hours each. The loosely-scripted

argument focused on relationship issues and the idea of breaking-up as an event that would never come but was constantly considered. The actors were advised to discuss specific subjects and to remain relatively ambiguous conversationally in order to obtain a level of absurdity that viewers would be able to pick-up on over time. Beyond these simple instructions, the actors were left to improvise. *All Persons Fictitious* was a reaction to a question I raised for myself: how to create tension in a space to a degree that would call the audience to question their place in it. This piece received two types of responses: those who were curious enough to stay in the space and were rewarded by the realization of the fiction of the situation, and those who wanted to leave the space as quickly as possible because of their personal discomfort. I would not say that one reaction was necessarily “right” or “wrong” in this scenario; they were both of equal interest. This work, similar to my thesis installation, revealed something about the personality of each viewer through their interaction with it.



fig 1. Janelle Proulx, *Untitled* (From The Series *The Latitude and Longitude of Something*), Dimensions Variable, 2011.



fig 2. Janelle Proulx, Still from *Untitled Video (Barb)*, 2013.



fig 3. Janelle Proulx, *Mere Contact*, Documentation of Installation, 2013.



fig 4. Janelle Proulx, *All Persons Fictitious*, Documentation of Performance, 2013.

Thesis: *REVERB*

My thesis installation embodies the themes and ideas that I have been considering over the past two years. It contains a sense of theatricality, places emphasis on the viewer as a participant, explores the capabilities of touch and gesture, and explores ideas about control and power. *REVERB* is a multi-sensory piece that focuses on sight, sound, and touch to create a dynamic, immersive experience. The title references a sound phenomenon that is dependent on space, thus tying the installation at its core to the effects of space and the way that it lingers or reverberates. Also addressing engagement with other artists—as *REVERB* has opened up to facilitate and host works from various other creative minds regarding the central themes of the installation, the title speaks to the back-and-forth vibration of ideas within the space or off of one another.

Since *REVERB* relies heavily on physical layout and movement through space, it seems appropriate to describe the way that a viewer would move through the piece in detail. When approaching the installation, the viewer initially enters a waiting space that opens to the rest of the gallery. Here a circle is projected onto the main wall and cyclically changes color to act as a visual cue to enter the installation. Signage mounted to the wall neighbors the projection. These signs inform the viewer of instructions as they read “Maximum Occupancy: 1” and “Please remove your shoes before entering.” There is also a sign-up sheet and cards with an illustrated schematic map that can be taken by viewers. From here, viewers ideally enter one at a time into a small meditation room that is bathed in the color Baker-Miller pink. The room utilizes color, texture, sound, and light to create a surreal space that is inviting and calming. Following completion of a five minute, audio guided meditation in this space, the viewer is invited to move on to the next room. Turning a corner, the viewer encounters a male wrestler dressed in a singlet

in an activated stance. The wrestler is statuesque in his stillness, heightening the surreal quality that was initiated in the meditation space. When the viewer moves further into this room, the wrestler approaches the participant and hugs them. The viewer then exits the wrestler's room and moves into the final space. Here, two figures are embracing one another according to wall-mounted light bulbs that can be controlled by the audience via light switches. In this room, people can congregate and a level of control is given back to the viewer through their ability to dictate the action of the performance. The performers in this room are on a rotation of gender dyads, transitioning between male-male, male-female, and female-female pairings in staggered twenty-minute increments. As they move through *REVERB*, the viewer goes through a shift between feeling in control and not. The surprise of the wrestler elicits an emotional or instinctual response to a potential confrontation, while the ensuing embrace subverts the viewer's expectations.

This direct engagement with the viewer eliminates the ability of the audience to act as a voyeur. Instead, they are required to question themselves and their own physical relationship to the artwork and when someone is physically engaged, they are psychologically engaged as well. As Valie Export states in an interview with Devin Fore for *Interview Magazine*, "But the truth is that there is no surface of the body independent of its interior. It's obvious that the outside of the body is always connected to the inside, to thought processes and to an internal anatomy."² This has been biologically proven, made apparent by the way that stress hormones are lowered and oxytocin is released in response to warm touch.³ In relationship to *REVERB*, the viewer may be undergoing a biological shift as they move through the space. Although I am unable to measure

² "VALIE EXPORT." *Interview Magazine*, September 10, 2012. <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/valie-export/> (Accessed February 16, 2014).

³ Rick Chillot, "The Power of Touch," *Psychology Today*, March 11, 2013.

this myself, I am able to gather stories of people's emotional experiences and video record their physical movement through the installation.

By using physical and direct engagement with the viewer, I want to explore the capacity of touch and meditation to reduce anxieties and fears. In *REVERB*, unsolicited touch from a symbolically aggressive figure (the wrestler) is the catalyst for a sense of alarm. Can a hug from a male stranger transition from a perception of threat to a nonthreatening interaction? And would the engagement with a meditation prior to this help to subvert this perceived threat? This piece operates as an artistic exploration of social dynamics and interactions, and is the result of my study of not only previous artists who have engaged directly with touch, but also psychological research on the subject. The psychological impact of space and environment is a prevalent consideration in *REVERB*.

Spatial Influence

As I have researched studies involving environmental psychology, I have synthesized my findings into *REVERB* to inform and heighten the shifts that occur between each of the rooms. The first space, the meditation room, is painted Baker-Miller pink, or "drunk tank pink", which was found in the 1970s to reduce aggression and lower heart rate. Subsequently, many prisons and "drunk tanks" were painted this chalky, but vibrant shade of the girlish hue in hopes of subduing agitated drunkards and potentially aggressive inmates. The exposure of the viewer to this color during the guided meditation prior to entering the wrestling room emphasizes the importance of relaxation while linking the work visually to a psychological precedent. The ideal is for the viewer to leave the meditation space relaxed and curious as to why they feel so relaxed after coming out of a room with such a vibrant and saturated color. As they move into the next

space where the wrestler is positioned I hope for this calmness to persist, but to be conflicted by the startling nature of his presence.

The works of Olafur Eliasson, Kimsooja, and Yayoi Kusama, have been touchstones for me during the creation of *REVERB* due to the way that each of these artists have constructed and controlled environments to elicit emotive responses. Each of these artists rely on lighting to achieve a desired affect. In Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003), he simulates a warm sun in the Tate's Turbine Hall (fig. 5). Here viewers are able to lay, bathing in the glow and creating a temporary community in the space. Likewise, Kimsooja in her piece *To Breathe* (2006), generates a unique space through her application of a light refracting film to the crystal palace in Madrid which creates rainbows that playfully bounce off the walls and mirrored floor (fig. 6). This space becomes a transcendental environment that can only be fully experienced through live presence, a trait similar to *REVERB* in its necessity for physical interaction.

Yayoi Kusama's *Fireflies on the Water* (2002) operates differently from *The Weather Project* and *To Breathe* due to its emphasis on isolation. For this piece (as it was shown at The Whitney Museum), viewers are allowed to enter the room one at a time for one minute. One minute seems hardly enough time to experience the work, however, the transition from the museum to Kusama's small mirrored room transports the viewer into a space where time seems to slow down (fig. 7). Once in the room, the viewer stands atop a catwalk over a shallow pool of water and is surrounded by small, glowing LEDs suspended from the ceiling that are multiplied into infinity by the mirrored walls that compound themselves. The viewer's isolation in the constructed environment instigates an inescapable self-that is augmented by the room's silence, which also offers a transformative shift from the busy environment of the museum. Operating like a portal, this space creates an Alice In Wonderland-like transition from the real to the

fantastical and offers a moment of escape. The meditation space in *REVERB* functions most similarly to *Fireflies on the Water* due to its transitional and solitary nature.

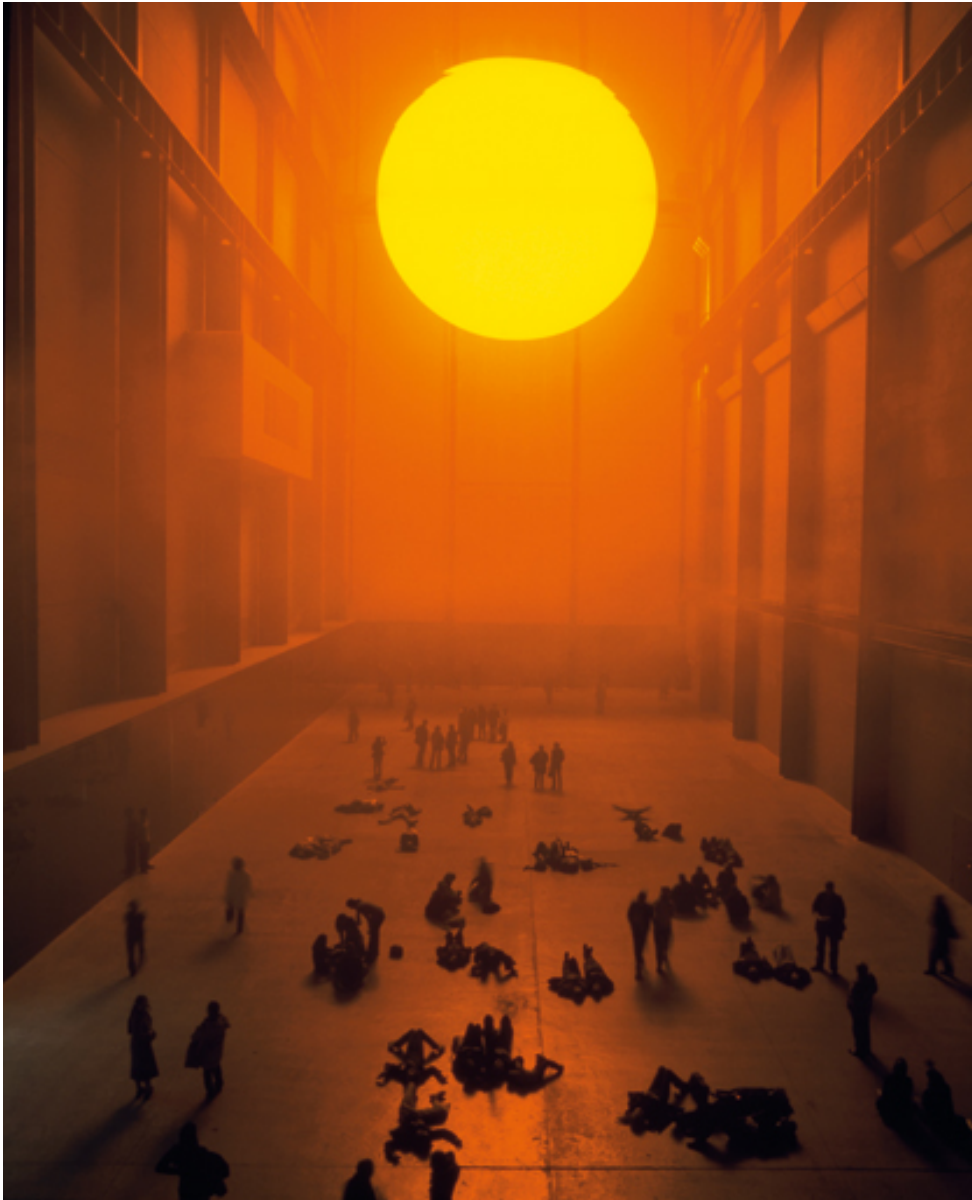


fig. 5 Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Promotional image for The Tate Modern, 2003.



fig 6. Kimsooja, *To Breathe: A Mirror Woman*, Publicity still from Kimsooja Studio, 2006.



fig 7. Yayoi Kusama, *Fireflies on the Water*, Image taken for The Whitney Museum by Jason Schmidt, 2002.

Solitude and Meetings

Solitude is a condition for acquiring a sense of immensity. Alone one's thoughts wander freely over space. In the presence of others they are pulled back by an awareness of other personalities who project their own worlds onto the same area. Fear of space often goes with fear of solitude. To be in the company of human beings—even with one other person—has the effect of curtailing space and its threat of openness.⁴

In this work, solitude and interactions happen at various points. Initially, the viewer is in the communal waiting space that opens to the rest of the gallery. Here they can sit and enjoy the presence of others as they ready themselves for the transition into the work. The viewer is then asked to enter the space alone and to spend five minutes by themselves in a contemplative state within the pink meditation room. This removal from the gallery can either be interpreted by the viewer as a refuge or as an anxiety-provoking space due to the solitude that it requires. My hope for the work is to create the former and to allow for a space of calmness and sincere meditation, a means of preparing for the rest of the piece and to find a peaceful state with the self. In the meditation room the viewer is asked to give up critical thought in favor of an introspective moment, one which accepts rather than questions.

The next space is where the viewer confronts the wrestler. Their level of comfort or discomfort dictates the duration of the viewer's time in this space. I do not expect people to linger here, although there is no imposed time limit. I would guess that people will spend from thirty seconds to one minute in this space due to the tension and curiosity that is created between the wrestler's statue-like appearance and the viewer. This is similar to when you make eye contact with someone at a bus stop or on a train. There is typically a desire to interrupt the stare or mask it as quickly as possible, to reduce or interrupt the discomfort. When the viewer moves

⁴ Yi Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 59.

across the room, the wrestler will hug them. This embrace is intended to subvert the viewer's expectation of the wrestler's actions or nature and to hopefully generate a transition from discomfort to comfort. This is also visually illustrated in the singlet that the wrestler wears. The front is black with a small section of pink on one of the legs while the back of the singlet is all pink. This pink ties into the color of the meditation room and connects to the soothing that the wrestler's hug seeks to achieve. I have observed that the initial result of this interaction is typically an uncomfortable laughter. It's an interaction that is difficult to quickly process so this instinctive reaction is predictable.

Touch and Psychology

Psychologist Michael Hertenstein states that touch, long recognized as an infant's most developed sense, plays a key role in "cognitive, brain, and socioemotional development throughout infancy and childhood."⁵ It is well understood that touch is an essential element to development, yet touch is often prohibited not only in the art world, illustrated by the taboo of touching artwork, but in many other social contexts as well,. Particularly in the United States, children are instructed to "keep our hands to ourselves" rather than being informed how to engage with positive touch. While there are obvious reasons for this, such as liability and the restrictions of person-to-person contact due to societal discomfort with touch from strangers, these societal norms fail to define the potential place for touch in the art world. Must we be left to show it only as a depiction or representation of the act? Or is it possible for touch to be used in performance art in a way that is both meaningful and safe? Can direct engagement between performer and viewer be initiated in such a way that it produces a comforting and memorable experience? This section will present the way that physical touch interactions have been used by

⁵ Matthew J. Hertenstein, Dacher Keltner, Betsy App, Brittany A. Bulleit, and Ariane R. Jaskolka, "Touch Communicates Distinct Emotions." *Emotion*, no. 3 (2006): 528-533.

various artists and how this relates to *REVERB*, while also referring to recent psychological studies concerned with the capacity of touch to communicate.

While body language and the ability to communicate nonverbally is not a novel concept, psychological studies specifically regarding touch and its capacity for transmitting emotions have only garnered greater attention in the past ten years. Previous to these studies, touch was viewed as an “intensifier” or supporting means of communication. However, in studies conducted by Hertenstein and colleagues, it was revealed that touch is not only just as successful as vocal and facial expression in communicating emotions, but actually supersedes them in its ability to clearly communicate a range of positive emotions—namely sympathy, love, and gratitude. In contrast, facial expression was only able to clearly communicate joy.⁶ As can be seen from these findings, touch exhibits a wealth of possibilities as a means of communication. While the messages we send via touch may be transmitted subconsciously, they are interpreted very clearly. Since my goal as an artist is to transmit a message, I see touch as fertile ground for expanding the vocabulary of art and for creating richer connections.

Touch Art

Touch has been used by a select number of artists as a direct way to engage with viewers. The artists I have found using touch are mainly women, and the precedent is that touch is always solicited as an invitation to the audience from the performer. Among the artists I found using touch are Yoko Ono, Valie Export, Marina Abramovic, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Tiffany Trenda. Utilizing touch to question issues concerning the way that people interact with one

⁶ Hertenstein, "Touch Communicates Distinct Emotions," 528-533.

another, the works that will be discussed by these artists highlight the discomfort of touching strangers and reveal the inappropriateness of certain types of touch interactions between genders. Many of these works were also created amid the feminist movement and acted as radical methods of calling attention to the way that the female body was (and still is) represented in society as an object for both visual and physical pleasure.

For Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964-2003)⁷, she sits on a stage with a pair of scissors by her side and invites the audience to cut her clothing, taking the removed pieces with them (fig. 8). This work is largely about sacrifice, giving, and trust. Always wearing her best clothing, she offers them to the audience and asks for trust and compassion in return. She is not doing this half-heartedly. During the performance, Ono sits very still, creating an intense environment that heightens the idea that the audience is taking from her. This invitation for the audience to approach her and take her clothing creates an experience of intimacy between the artist and viewer. The viewer is now the active element with Ono sitting passively once the performance is underway. As Ono states, "Instead of giving what the artist chooses to give, the artist gives what the audience chooses to take."⁸ This shift in control reverses the typical power structure between artist and viewer and morphs Ono's body into a sculpture to be engaged with. Acting as a catalyst for interaction between artist and audience, *Cut Piece* allows for moments of hostility and of gentleness to surface through the audience's engagement. As art historian Kevin Concannon explains in his essay *Yoko Ono's Cut Piece: From Performance to Text and Back Again*, this work was not discussed in relation to feminism until the 1990s, a label that Ono does not attempt to disown upon its surfacing despite the score being written for both male and

⁷ Ono first performed *Cut Piece* at the Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo, in 1964, and has reprised the performance in London (1964) and Paris (2003).

⁸ Ingrid Pfeiffer, *Yoko Ono: Half-A-Wind Show: A Retrospective* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 30.

female performers.⁹ This work stands as an early referent for works utilizing touch; Ono showed here the vulnerability involved when using touch and also the ability of a touch interaction to have a powerful impact because of the directness involved in addressing and implicating the viewer.

Unlike Ono's *Cut Piece*, Valie Export's *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968) exists as the video document of her engagement with the public directly on the street. During her performance of this work, she invites passers-by to touch her breasts through a custom made box that is hung over her torso with theater-like curtains on the front (fig. 9). Through this provocative act, Export questions what is appropriate in a public sphere and also calls attention to the gender roles of touch. This act works as a means of exposing voyeurism, pulling what is typically hidden behind doors out onto the street.¹⁰ As a feminist action, Export makes a statement about access to the female body. In the video documentation of this performance, excited men can be seen readily interacting with her. The scene creates a sense of discomfort as she stares at the men while they grope her. This direct gaze is crucial to the critical function of the work because it prevents the active male participants from being able to engage in their actions without confrontation. They must encounter and acknowledge Export as a physically present and powerful figure with agency rather than as a distant body. What I find most uncomfortable is the distance that an exterior viewer has from the action due to the fact that the men's hands are hidden from view. The nature of their touch is indiscernible and Export's expression does little to convey any further information. Through this controversial work, Export puts her own body into a line of fire, allowing for an act of what would be deemed as sexual assault to occur with her permission. She

⁹ Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's: From Text To Performance And Back Again.," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 30, no. 3 (2008): 83.

¹⁰ Roswitha Mueller, *Valie Export: Fragments of the Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16.

thereby turns a viewer actively participating in her art into a molester, a social deviant, while simultaneously clarifying the passive viewer as a voyeur. While the desired and consequential outcomes for Export and Ono's works are extremely varied, they both are utilizing access to their bodies to provoke reactions despite Export's certainly being more antagonistic.

In *Rhythm 0* (1974), Marina Abramovic lays out seventy-two objects for viewers to use to interact with her, objects that could be used to produce either pleasure or pain (fig. 10). This piece operates similarly to Ono's *Cut Piece*, with the invitation to the viewer to use a tool to interact with the artist's body, but the intentions for these two pieces differ. While *Cut Piece* can be seen as a meditative act in favor of peace, *Rhythm 0* speaks more to the unpredictable nature of human interaction. For six hours, Abramovic stands in the gallery space quite literally at the mercy of the audience. In an interview with Chris Thompson and Katarina Weslian, *Rhythm 0* is described as such "a six-hour performance at Studio Morra in 1974, this involved Abramovic; placing 72 objects—ranging from a pen and scissors to a loaded gun—on a table and inviting visitors to use them on her 'as desired.'"¹¹ The varied impulses and responses provoked by Abramovic's decision to shift control from artist to viewer reveal the complexities of audience participation. Abramovic's piece requires a wealth of trust and a fearlessness on behalf of the artist in order to leave enough openness for the audience and to express a willingness to endure interaction with any of the objects presented to the audience. Similar to Export and Ono's work, the audience was solicited to physically engage a passive artist/performer, and again the gender of the performer cannot be overlooked. Abramovic's gender foregrounds the objectification, abuse, and mistreatment of women through this performance.

¹¹ Maria Abramović, Chris Thompson, and Katarina Weslien, "Pure Raw: Performance, Pedagogy, And (Re)presentation," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 1 (2006): 44.

In what was both an act of feminism and humanitarianism, Mierle Laderman Ukeles made a work of shaking the hands of 8,500 sanitation workers in New York from 1978-1980 (fig. 11). In *Touch Sanitation*, Ukeles was offering a meaningful interaction between herself and the sanitation workers, acknowledging an act that is often overlooked. Ukeles, herself a mother, saw motherhood and service industries such as sanitation to be inextricably linked. By offering recognition to this line of work as a performance piece, Ukeles in turn elevated the work of the New York sanitation department to be something worthy of inclusion in the art world. She also was blurring the boundaries between everyday life and art through her action.

In a more recent work titled *Proximity Cinema* (2013), Tiffany Trendera references Export when she invites viewers to touch small LCD screens that are attached to a red body suit she dons. When touched, the screens reveal images of the body parts that they cover (fig. 12). Trendera's piece addresses similar issues to the works of Abramovic and Export concerning touch and gender, but with a nod to the digital age and a level of anonymity that shifts the discussion to one about the medium and its connection to voyeurism.

Through examining these works, it is easy to see the role that gender has played in touch and performance art. Since these works are performed by women, they both intentionally and unintentionally reveal information about the socially constructed relationship of touch between men and women. While the relationships depicted in these artworks can be seen as reinforcing stereotypes, showing men as more aggressive and sexual, they are not wholly unfounded. In another study by Hertenstein he summarizes:

In this research, women are more likely than men to perceive touch from opposite-gender strangers as unpleasant and an invasion of privacy. Moreover, the more women perceive a touch as sexual from a male stranger, the less they perceive the touch as warm and friendly; whereas, the more men perceive a

touch as sexual from a female stranger, the more they perceive it as warm, pleasant, and friendly.¹²

Through this, it becomes apparent that perceptions of touch vary based on gender, a subject that inadvertently is addressed through the work of Abramovic and Ono and more directly through Export's *Touch Cinema*.

A work that highlights the binary gender construct that this finding speaks to is Abramovic and Ulay's *Imponderabilia*. Shown in 1977, Abramovic and Ulay stand nude facing each other within a doorway. Viewers at the museum are invited to pass between them to enter and in turn are required to make a decision as to which way to face. Combing through the documentation clarifies how this simple set-up reinforces gender norms. Men were more likely to turn the front of their body towards Abramovic while women were less likely to face Ulay. Thus, the majority chose to face Abramovic, which upholds Hertenstein's findings that women may potentially find physical touch from Ulay to be unpleasant due to his gender. This is not to say, however, that all participants faced Abramovic.

¹² Matthew Hertenstein and Dacher, Keltner, "Gender and the Communication of Emotion Via Touch," *Sex Roles* (2010). <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-010-9842-y/fulltext.html> (accessed February 16, 2014).



fig 8. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, documentation of performance, 1965.



fig 9. Valie Export, *Touch Cinema*, documentation of performance, 1968.



fig 10. Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, documentation of performance, 1974



fig 11. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation* Performance, Fresh Kills Landfill, Color Photograph, 60 x 90 in, 1978.



fig 12. Tiffany Trenda, Promotional Image for *Proximity Cinema*, 2013.

With the use of a male initiated touch in *REVERB*, I am curious to see how people will respond. Unlike the works presented above, in this piece the audience is approached rather than given an opportunity to initiate the touch. I am intentionally using the symbol of the wrestler here to convey the idea of an aggressive nature, which is connected to perceptions of male touch as discussed. The wrestler also stands to show a controlled knowledge of the body. Wrestlers are acutely aware of how the body moves, because success in this sport demands that they know how to react to their opponent's shifts and feints. Recognition of the wrestler's expertise concerning body movement is meant to offer a point of understanding for the viewer, providing a way for the audience member to realize that they are in safe hands, so to speak. This sense of safety is reinforced by the inherent social contract of the gallery space and the assumption that

there are basic unwritten rules regarding security, thus hopefully subverting an extreme sense of physical danger.

There are many types of gestures and touch that can be looked at, analyzed and implemented, so you may ask, why this centering on the hug? I have chosen to focus on the hug because I view the hug as democratic. The hug is not reserved for romantic relationships, but is often created and exchanged between all types of relationships: familial, romantic, friendship, acquaintance, etc. Likewise, the hug's relationship to restraint is paramount. If a hug persists for too long and is held over the receiver, it turns into an act of restraint and possible aggression. This interest in gestures that can shift between meanings with subtle changes (such as duration here) ties back to my initial video studies, which have hugely informed my process in arriving at this installation.

As the viewer moves through *REVERB*, a change will hopefully occur that will be a bit out of their control. Rather than the typical route of a person being "moved" by a piece, the piece moves the person. This is an exercise in control, but the control shifts and can never be fully dictated. As I've discovered through testing this piece in multiple sketches, you can never fully predict or instruct a person on what to do. The way that different people will engage with this work, either through complete surrender to the sequence of events or with a deep desire to test the boundaries of the work will speak to each person's character and personality. While I set out these rules of movement and interaction in the work, I, at a certain degree, allow for and accept each person's individuality and idiosyncrasies.

Manipulation or Facilitation

Since moving towards making participatory works that implicate the viewer, I've taken a lot of time to consider the viewer and the amount of control that they have within a work. I have

a personal ideal that the viewer must have as much agency as possible within a work, but yet many of my works exercise a great degree of control over the movements and anticipated reactions of the viewer. I've consistently had to ask myself why this is and question how close I come to being a manipulator instead of a facilitator. My hope is not to manipulate people or make them feel used, but to stage environments and events that influence people, to guide their interpretation rather than force them to a singular conclusion. A question that I have been consistently returning to while making this project is where does the boundary lie between forced and provided participation?

Bruce Nauman is one artist who I have looked to in order to help answer this question. Nauman's work often deals with manipulating physical space to produce an emotional impact. His work likewise requires the viewer to move a specific way, typically only having a single pathway as in *Performance Corridor* (1969) which invites the viewer to walk into a very tight space between two temporary, free-standing walls (fig. 13). In an interview published in *Please Pay Attention Please*, Nauman muses about his desire for control in regards to *Performance Corridor* and his intentional subversion of what he calls "free manipulation" in his statement, "I really had more specific kinds of experiences in mind and, without having to write out a list of what they should do, I wanted to make kind of play experiments unavailable, just by the preciseness of the area."¹³ Nauman fully embraces his role as a manipulator in his work, something that has inspired and encouraged me to not shy away from heavy guidance of the viewer when I find myself inclined towards this.

¹³ Bruce Nauman and Janet Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), 167.

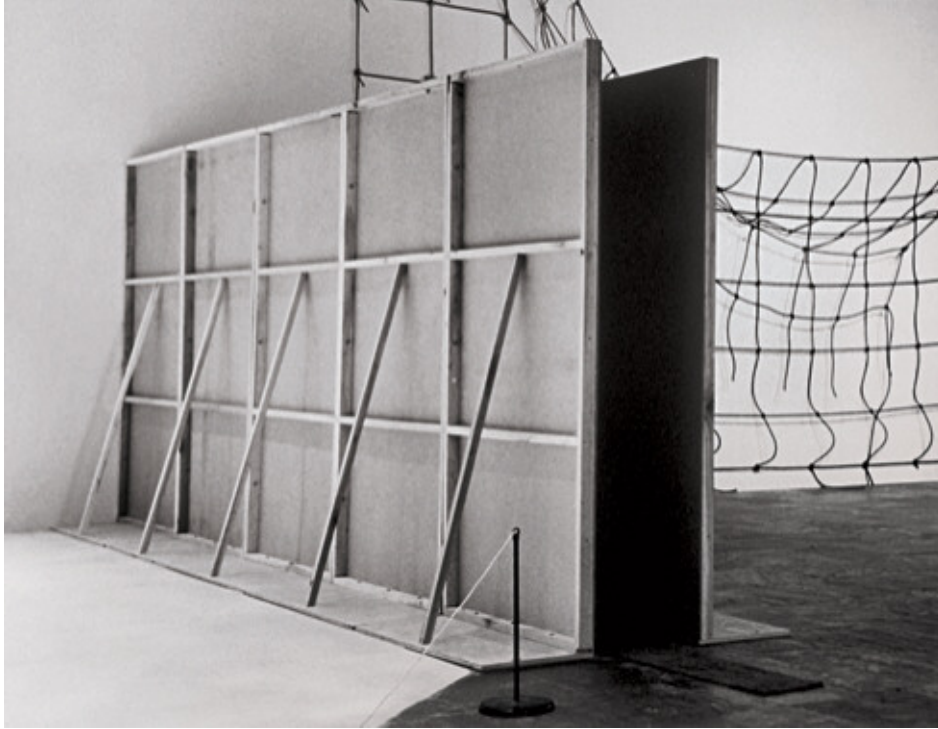


fig 13. Bruce Nauman, *Performance Corridor*, Wallboard and wood, 96 × 240 × 20 inches, 1969.

Conclusion

Over the course of the past two years I have made gradual and sometimes large changes in my studio practice, which have brought me to the creation of *REVERB*. While my thematic interests have remained relatively consistent, I have deepened my understanding of these concepts in order to make work that speaks to the subjects of touch, environmental influence, and participation in intelligent ways. While *REVERB* does feel like a culmination of my ideas as of recently, it is already clear to me that this work is going to serve as a launching point to which I will constantly refer and build upon both materially and conceptually.

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