

Please Don't Touch the Artwork

Abstraction, Control, and Faye Driscoll's *Come On In*

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In early March 2020, I touched down on the beds (or, perhaps, on the bed-sized plinths, platforms, or pedestals) that made up choreographer and performance artist Faye Driscoll's installation *Come On In*. Sited at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and curated to coincide with Driscoll's performance of *Thank You for Coming: Space*, the third in her *Thank You for Coming* dance trilogy (2014–2019), the installation served as a coda of sorts for the performance series. It was the only iteration of *Thank You for Coming* that did not feature live performers. As spectators we were invited to remove our shoes, situate ourselves on one of several upholstered wooden pedestals in the cavernous gallery, adjust headphones over our ears, and listen to Driscoll's voice leading us through a meditative landscape of imagery. Alternately soothing and provocative, tranquil and full of urgent need, the voice suggested physical gestures we could make and recited fragments of text from the three *Thank You for Coming* performances. Most importantly, the voice characterized a spectrum of types of touch that hypothetically might occur between listener and speaker: intimate, tense, caring, dominant, and submissive. Though my only physical contact was with an upholstered platform and a pair of headphones, my experience of *Come On In* was overwhelmingly about the sensation and significance of touch.

With this apparent contradiction as a point of departure, the life cycle of Driscoll's installation offers a means of thinking through the nature of touch in performance and the visual arts, and the role that abstraction might play in constructing a social ethos of touch. By abstraction, I do not simply mean distance or hypothetical possibility: I specifically invoke the history of sculptural abstraction because *Come On In* does, and because this history brings shape and clarity to a conversation about the valences of touch among visual and performing arts. In fact, with *Come On In*, Driscoll and her longtime designers, the visual artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin, teased us with the idea that, standing in the gallery entrance with no performers or audience members on view, we were already looking at the art. The platforms were scattered conversationally, pointed asymmetrically toward one another like a temporary gathering of acquaintances, some conspiratorially close, others placed at a hesitant or respectful distance. Some were high and narrow, requiring audience members to clamber onto them; others were low and wide. One was a double-wide with two sets of headphones. Rotating from one platform to the next, audience members encountered a series of six audio tracks with titles such as "Oh, Holy Hole!"; "Recycled Bitch"; "Search Engine"; and "I want your body"—phrases that are more intimate than the visual installation might suggest (Driscoll 2020b). Driscoll titled these audio tracks, collectively, *Guided Choreography for the Living and the Dead*. (Here, for clarity, I primarily use the complete installation's title, *Come On In*.) The convocation of platforms could be, on its own, an allegorical image of social life: a lie-in, a die-in, spectators chatting in the lobby after a show. A collection of tombs clustered for a social afterlife.

These pedestals might also have been minimalist sculptures, defiantly spare boxes asking to be examined the way we'd look at a Donald Judd (to name an artist synonymous with the placement of austere rectangular figures on the gallery floor). Or, to offer a more precise analogue, the way we'd look at a work by Robert Morris, a minimalist sculptor explicitly associated with the dance world where Driscoll found her artistic start. Placed in a visual arts gallery, curated by an elite institution that is both visual arts-forward and multidisciplinary, funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant intended to bring the visual and performing arts together, *Come On In* might present itself as a poster child for the now decades-long practice of siting performances and participatory installations in visual arts spaces. But it's stickier than that to the touch, and I mean this literally, because *Come On In*—unlike most visual art, but very much like theatre and dance—contains furniture, and invites the possibility of physical contact. *Come On In*, unlike much sculpture but very much like many works of live art, started out as an ephemeral event on a shared bill with other performers; Driscoll's original piece featured only her voice and a microphone.

These formal histories suggest a different relationship to both artistic control and gendered and sexualized forms of control than our current discourses often admit. It can be tempting, for instance, to assume that performing arts spaces discipline spectators more rigidly, insisting that audience members sit passively for predetermined lengths of time, while galleries and museums offer the autonomy of circulating at will. Yet the institutional requirements of production are different—often necessitating a relinquishing of artistic authority in the circulation of performance, and attaching the expectation that visual artworks will be linked to an artist's specifications

Figure 1. (previous page) Faye Driscoll's Come On In at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 27 February–14 June 2020. (Photo by Bobby Rogers for Walker Art Center, Minneapolis)

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Figure 2. Faye Driscoll's *Come On In* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 27 February–14 June 2020. (Photo by Bobby Rogers for Walker Art Center, Minneapolis)



Figure 3. Faye Driscoll's *Come On In* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 27 February–14 June 2020. (Photo by Bobby Rogers for Walker Art Center, Minneapolis)

even after their death.¹ Such tensions become particularly rich in artistic works that are about the nature of control, and in this case, the gendered and sexualized nature of control as it relates to touch.

Physical contact resonates differently in different art forms, invoking questions of transgression, privacy, public health, and privilege, among other concepts. Touch can constitute a consumerist ploy, a presumed index of active participation in artistic work, a choreography, or a violation of all assumed social and artistic conventions. Abstract touch—my destination point here—is, I propose, the artistic invocation of touch in the absence of physical contact; the examination of touch's meaning in disciplinary, gendered, and social terms, and in ways that can be made manifest most poignantly when physical contact has been removed. The concept I am proposing lives in relation to, for instance, the idea of the “conceptual body” explicated by Amelia Jones in a 2018 *TDR* essay, which, for Jones, provides a means of understanding the encounter between artists' and spectators' bodies as a lever for engaging larger concepts of social injustice and political tension (2018:14–15). Here, though, I am suggest-

ing abstract touch to denote artworks that invoke the spectator's body, but separate it deliberately in time and space from the body of the artist. This is a powerful intervention in artworks that stem from or hold conversation with live performance, because performance is so very much about the discomfort of live bodies in proximity, a discomfort of which the visual arts world is deeply aware.

Performance, the artist Malik Gaines once wrote, “never really feels like it belongs in art's world. It's always using the wrong fork at dinner” (2012). Touch—a mode of contact that holds particular possibilities to embarrass, to transgress, to literalize the touchy-feeliness for which theatre and dance are so frequently held in contempt among the art forms—opens a particularly

1. I do not suggest here that this is always or universally the case, nor is this statement intended to ignore the function of copyright in theatre, dance, and other performing arts. However, as my discussion of *Come On In* will demonstrate, I do believe one can say that it's rare for performing artists to exert the level of control expected in the visual arts—which is one of the reasons that the stipulations of, say, the Beckett estate gain notoriety in the theatre world.

powerful set of questions about the ways that visual art forms include but distance performance, close as it is to that most embarrassing art form of all, the theatre. It's not that theatre always, or even often, includes physical contact between actors and spectators: it's that with live bodies onstage and in the seats, the threat is there, alluring and repulsive by turns. In theatre, we are ever poised to pick up the wrong fork.

The Public Senses

Touch has long been subject to suspicion in the performing arts. In a much-circulated *TDR* interview from 1965, John Cage famously identified vision and hearing as the two senses inherent to theatre. As he told his interviewers, Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, this was because sight and sound are the “two public senses.” Other modes of perception, including touch, “are more proper to intimate, non-public, situations” (Cage, Kirby, and Schechner 1965:50). This statement of principles resonates as significant in a consideration of touch in experimental performance even now: primarily because Cage, that icon of American experimental performance, had staked a claim to radical inclusivity for the art form (anything that could be experienced visually or aurally could be considered theatre). Understanding touch, an excluded sensory element, as central to theatre—particularly touch between performers and spectators—might therefore be radical still.

This principled suspicion of touch resonates differently, but no less loudly, in dance and the visual arts, as Cage's major interventions in theatrical discourse emerged from well-known collaborations with Merce Cunningham's choreography, Robert Rauschenberg's sculpture, and more. Cage's claims, reshaped in reception and artistic inheritance, might echo powerfully in the refusal of contact—even eye contact—for which Yvonne Rainer's Judson-era choreography, which followed closely on Cunningham's work but often refused its doctrines, was known. And they might echo even now as those generations of multidisciplinary artists are remembered in the work of current performance-makers like Driscoll herself.²

Of course, Cage's statement about touch has never been true. It was particularly untrue during the decade when he made this pronouncement: Schechner himself was an enthusiastic curator of physical contact between spectators and audience members, as were many of his peers. Touch has been central throughout the history of the avantgarde, even in radical postmodern dance. While Rainer was rejecting the misogynistic valences of contact in *Trio A*, Steve Paxton was developing Contact Improvisation, which amplifies physical touch to a communal ethos, and Deborah Hay was choreographing her Circle Dances, which emphasized unison choreography and hand-holding. Touch never left the downtown theatre either. Proximity to touch was magnified as a bridge to revolution by the Living Theatre, posited as subversive by Annie Sprinkle, and—cutting to the capitalist punchline—reimagined as one of immersive theatre's selling points in the wake of Punchdrunk and its peers.³

But the threat of touch in the theatre—whether presented as politically radical in *Dionysus in 69* or oppressively cute following *Sleep No More*—has typically traded on its nonpublic nature, taking its power from our assumption that physical contact between spectators and performers is still proscribed or at least private in some way; that the indulgence of a private sense in a space with other people is exciting, subversive, or new. What if touch were, then, to become a public sense, and one with not only a public but a social potential? What if touch were mobilized as a means of being social, precisely through its abstraction away from representations of personal intimacy (as is the case in so much interactive and immersive theatre) and toward a sociopolitical kind of

2. The interview is from 1965, three years before Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* would offer what seemed to be an equally open-ended paradigm for naming an event “theatre,” but which, unlike Cage's definition, requires a performer and a spectator. This is the same decade in which the choreographers associated with Judson Dance Theater, to name only one example, were redefining what kinds of gestures could be considered choreography (see for example Baner [1977] 1987).

3. See Alexis Soloski's 2018 article for further discussion of the nature of physical contact in *Sleep No More* and its contemporaries.

intimacy? And what if those interventions were to happen in a moment when touch of any kind was drastically reduced, its stakes heightened, due to a global pandemic? Such conditions might be the ones in which touch becomes most meaningful in its absence, when abstracting touch becomes the primary way to investigate its significance.

All three of Driscoll's *Thank You for Coming* performances had drawn on audience participation, often including physical touch, and Driscoll did not come lightly to an ethos of contact between performers and spectators. A dancer by training, she began choreographing original works most consistently during a 2005 residency at Brooklyn Arts Exchange. After making the 2000s-era dances that drew initial recognition—works including *837 Venice Boulevard* (2008) and *There Is So Much Mad in Me* (2010), for instance—she began constructing the *Thank You for Coming* trilogy. Performers had frequently touched one another in Driscoll's choreography—manipulating one another's bodies like puppets, remixing culturally received images of intimacy and pain—but dancers started touching the audience in earnest in *Thank You for Coming: Attendance*, which premiered at Danspace Project in 2014. Audience participation in that piece, informed by Driscoll's work as a choreographer for theatre artists like Young Jean Lee and Taylor Mac,⁴ included modes of touch as casual as the unexpected spilling of a dance ensemble into the laps of seated spectators, and as formal as direct invitations from performers to spectators to join hands and participate in a group circle dance in the performance's final moments.

In *Thank You for Coming: Space*, the third in the trilogy, Driscoll asked spectators to cocreate the soundscape; to hold her head or hands so that she could complete her choreography; to hold props and materials she'd need later in the piece. This and the other *TYFC* works engaged with physical touch as a social phenomenon, constructing temporary communities with temporary rules of engagement. Yet none of these works used touch as a shorthand for fictionalized intimacy, or explicitly expected that the forms of touch required in performance would result in an altered social relationship to touch *after* the performance; the invocation is of physical contact in its own moment, rather than as symbol of or prompt to any larger narrative beyond. For Driscoll, who thinks of these works as “secular rites” while maintaining sobriety about the direct relationship between political formations in the performance space and their impact in the political world outside, the significant aim is the “state of attention” that a heightened consciousness of performer-audience relationships can create. For her, the performances' political “indeterminacy” is crucial, as is, in her words, “the freedom to be obtuse” (Driscoll 2022).

Obtuseness bears significant relationship to abstraction and to the risk of moving nonrepresentationally in institutional spaces that have demanded legibility differently from different artists. Queer and femme artists and artists of color have so frequently been told, implicitly and explicitly, that the politics of art reside in its legibility, that the stories of marginalized people and groups cannot be told unless the stories are told lucidly, in representational terms. Instances of such tension range from the 1990s-era responses to the abstract, poetic early dramas of Suzan-Lori Parks (Garrett 2000) to recent institutional expectations faced by queer, trans, and nonbinary artists, confronting often-unspoken assumptions about what is comfortable for cis-heteronormative audiences. In their 2022 essay “What Is a Non-Binary Play?” Jonathan Alexandratos notes,

In my own work and in the work of other non-binary playwrights, I see formal shifts, pushbacks, additions, and questions declared through stories that are often dismissed by the cis-heteronormative establishment as too distant from the prescriptions of Aristotelian theatre to qualify as dramatic narrative. They aren't, of course, and the insistence that they are only serves another oppressive binary: the play/not play divide that has been used to exclude

4. In particular, Driscoll mentioned to me Young Jean Lee's much-cited practice of beginning an artistic project by deciding to make the last work of art she'd ever imagine wanting to create: audience participation fell into this category for Driscoll as she began the *TYFC* series. Lee has been cited describing this philosophy many times, but see, for instance, Hilton Als (2014).

many female, Black, Indigenous, POC, queer, and neurodiverse artists, and all intersections thereof and beyond. (Alexandratos 2022)

The suggestion that marginalized communities must tell narratives clearly and without abstraction is so deeply embedded in cultural assumptions about art that it can even drive scientific inquiry about the potential of performance to create empathy in an alienated body politic.⁵ “Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don’t have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized,” choreographer Miguel Gutierrez wrote in 2018, in a seminal essay called “Does Abstraction Belong to White People?” The history of whiteness and exclusion in the well-known story about abstraction runs deep; that most elite of artistic nomenclatures has so often been applied only to white male art since a presumed point of origin in European avantgarde painting. The visual arts have in many instances worked to dismantle this narrative: see, for examples among many, manuel arturo abreu’s YouTube lecture, which situates illegibility in the landscape of graffiti as a form of resistance to white supremacy; or John Yau’s essay about the abstract visual art of Odili Donald Odita (abreu 2020; Yau 2023). It’s time for the performing arts to consider abstraction in a similarly intentional and political framework. Touch, hardly abstract in its daily evocations of intimacy, offers an unexpectedly compelling point of entry.

Abstracting Touch

In the modern visual arts, touch is also a touchy subject. Both Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg had famously faulted Minimalist sculpture for its phenomenal nature, which seemed to them to have failed to deliver the strictly optical experience abstract modern art should (Fried 1967; Greenberg [1967] 1993; see Fer 1997:136–37). Decades later, in her landmark book *On Abstract Art*, Briony Fer pointed out that even the most austere of minimalist sculpture can deceive the viewer with its seeming imperviousness to touch. While Judd’s factory-produced materials can appear impenetrable and timeless, they are in fact deeply sensitive to every fingerprint and contact with organic matter. Manufactured without human hands, their artistic and visual integrity requires that they remain that way (Fer 1997:151).

I invoke these precedents because the pedestals of *Come On In* offer such an appealing bridge to minimalist sculpture; it is impossible for the mind not to wander across this bridge briefly, which brings significant disciplinary tensions to light. The installation isn’t necessarily abstract in art-historical terms; Driscoll’s spectator-participants—her living sculptures, in a sense—are the essence of literal representation. If understood, even briefly, as the completion of a visual art installation that begins with a pedestal, the spectator-participant becomes a statue, that essence of literalized anthropomorphic representation from which sculptors tried hard to disentangle their art over 50 years ago (Getsy 2015:xii). In art-historical terms, Vaughan and Margolin’s platforms might be described not as pedestals but as plinths (Penny 2008:461), given their horizontal orientation and the invitation for the human “statue” to recline. (Unlike “pedestal,” “plinth” carries the connotation of serving as a base or support without the implication of symbolically elevating whatever rests on top of it.) Whether plinth or pedestal, the base structure supporting anthropomorphic sculpture has been implicated in debates about spectatorship since long before Minimalist sculptors began situating their art objects directly on the floor. In the 19th century, statues of historical and mythological figures situated “in the round” were criticized because the uniformity of a rectangular pedestal offered a spectator too many possible vantage points, leveling the viewing field and refusing to direct her to

5. In 2021, the psychologists Steve Rathje, Leor Hackel, and Jamil Zaki published an article describing a psychological study they conducted with theatre audiences, seeking to understand whether the form of empathy that narrative, characterological theatre promotes would lead audience members to have greater care for their communities at large. Audiences watching Hansol Jung’s *Wolf Play* and Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat* were surveyed after the performances in an attempt to learn whether empathizing with characters’ struggles had inspired them to donate to charities (Rathje et al. 2021). See also Zaki’s book *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* (2019).

the proper standpoint for viewing (Savage 2010:12). (This is an anxiety that, as Kirk Savage notes, oddly anticipated Michael Fried's field-defining complaint in "Art and Objecthood" [1967].)

Come On In, despite its physical placement of spectators on soft, inviting flat surfaces with soft, inviting carpet below does not meaningfully level anything: it draws us in with the suggestion of safety in abstraction, then implicates us in its interrogation of dominance. Such is the nature of touch, theorists on the subject suggest. In the introduction to her 2007 book *Politics of Touch* (a book I consulted because Driscoll had), Erin Manning remarks on the difficulty at the outset of her research of finding political or cultural studies that directly addressed touch at all. Manning's study, which takes Argentine tango as one of its primary objects of analysis, argues that the mobility and instability of the sensing body offers a means of understanding political formation, providing a counterpoint to the strictures of political boundary keeping and the calcification of late-capitalist democracy (Manning 2007:xviff.).

By the time Manning's book was published, and in the years since, touch emerged across a number of related but distinct fields. In *Moving Relation: Touch in Contemporary Dance*, Gerko Egert argued, like Manning, that physical contact would always be a multivalent phenomenon, powerful yet impossible to confine to a single political meaning and certainly not legible as a form of sensory resistance against optic or aural regimes:

Tactility, here at the start of the 21st century, is no longer considered a way to escape the prevailing dominant visual forms. Sexist and racist politics are instead linked within them, making them a mode of governing. Touch is neither a moral nor a genuinely critical concept but rather creates the possibilities of relationality and sensing, which cannot be reduced to either the zone of normative exercises of power or to a critical practice. (2019:10)

As I see it, tactility never was a means of escaping, in Egert's words, dominant visual forms. One of the propositions available in an investigation of touch is to address directly the very question of dominance in the relationship between the work of art and its viewer. To do so, I offer a sustained comparison between *Come On In* and *Voice*, a 1974 installation by the American minimalist sculptor Robert Morris. The two installations, separated by four and a half decades, resoundingly echo one another across time, both visually and aurally, and while both join tactile sculpture with a gendered investigation of sound, they do so in revealingly different ways. Morris's *Voice*, installed at the Castelli and Sonnabend Galleries as part of a solo show that also included his *Labyrinths* and *Blind Time*, featured 14 large rectangular boxes situated in a cluster on the gallery floor, scattered at angles as Driscoll's would be in *Come On In*. Morris's benches were covered in white felt,⁶ on which visitors were invited to sit while listening to a three-and-a-half-hour soundtrack of spliced-together recordings of monologues, found text, and conversations. The gallery-goer experienced sound spatially, as voices distorted, waxed and waned, and moved in and out of stereo among the specially installed speakers. Unlike Driscoll's soundtrack, sound in Morris's installation was not a private experience, but an unavoidable public element pulsing through the gallery. Like *Come On In*, though, visitors were invited to encounter the work as time-based art. The original exhibition listed the start times for the soundtracks as 11:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. daily, implying that spectators should plan to arrive at the beginning and stay until the end the way one might with a performance (Brown 2020).

Accounts of the recordings make clear that Morris was offering the visitors an experience of gender and power. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's September 1974 review of the piece describes the recording in terms of four sections, each offering a different investigation of perception, gendered domination, and the body. One section juxtaposed descriptions of bodily injuries and scars with descriptions of extreme athletic feats. Another quoted from the writings of 1920s-era psychiatrist

6. The Castelli Gallery press release refers to the material as felt, while a critic in a 2020 panel discussion hosted by the gallery refers to it as "velvet." I take my cue from the gallery's materials in referring to it as felt (Castelli 1974).



Figure 4. Robert Morris's *Voice*, Castelli Gallery, New York, 2020. (Photo courtesy of Castelli of Gallery. © 2023 The Estate of Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

Emil Kraepelin, describing the early diagnostic methods used to define schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and featuring a male-presenting voice and a female-presenting one, often overlapping with each other (1974:47). “In all of this,” wrote Gilbert-Rolfe, “the use of Kraepelin is signally apposite; it suggests with a particular succinctness that the elevated but strained rhetoric of the performer-hero has its origin in public knowledge, that the individual—as he’s known and as he comes to know himself—is the product of an institutional vernacular that precedes him and provides the vocabulary that comes to be identified as his own” (47). This slippage between personal epistemology and institutional vernacular is at stake in both *Voice* and, 46 years later, *Come On In*.

Like *Voice*, *Come On In* suggests that disciplinary vocabularies reflect the social vocabularies we use to represent coherent individual identities such that the politics of touch can be reduced to private, personally intimate spaces and sequestered from larger social concepts. Also like *Voice*, *Come On In* offers what I am calling abstract touch by combining explicit and representational talk of physical contact with visual and tactile abstraction. Driscoll’s soundtrack began with nearly neutral phrasing, the vocabulary of comfortable self-awareness commonplace in yoga and meditation classes. “Let go of evaluating things visually, and bring your focus inside yourself,” she tells the listener in one of the six tracks (Driscoll 2020a).⁷ Recalling the first performance of the audio piece—staged at the Lion’s Jaw Festival in Massachusetts in November 2019, and featuring no

7. All quotations from the audio tracks of *Guided Choreography for the Living and the Dead* are drawn from this recording.



Figure 5. Faye Driscoll's *Come On In* at Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon, 19 November 2021–15 January 2022. (Photo by Mario Gallucci)

installation, just Driscoll's voice performing live with a microphone—Lion's Jaw producer Jared Williams pointed out that the audience's familiarity with such exhortations to mindfulness was received as humorous initially. As the monologue unfolded, Williams noted, "she slowly started to add more of her own needs and desires into the prompts" (Williams 2022). The relationship between the speaker and her imagined listener shimmers with lust, affection, perhaps embarrassment. "My baby," Driscoll whispers at intervals. Without such intimate language,

the audio tracks would be a less troubling experience, less insistent that the audience member consider the relationship between sexualized control and the body of a stranger, a stranger at a distance, a stranger at a distance in an environment structured not for intimacy but for art.

When *Come On In* toured to Oregon in 2021 to be presented at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), the performing arts curator, Erin Boberg Doughton, encountered different responses from different audience groups. Spectators accustomed to theatre and dance were more prepared, perhaps even more comfortable, with the embodied experience of disembodiment the installation proposed. Art-world spectators, in question-and-answer sessions, brought up concerns about consent; they expressed anxiety about Driscoll's vocal persona asking for their embodied imagination, asking them to imagine caressing a stranger, or a person they know, or her (Boberg Doughton 2023).⁸ Touch is not just social; it is artistically particular, and the idea of being touched is socialized into us by the art forms we engage with, and socialized out of us by the art forms we scorn. It is a testament to the significance of touch—but also to our limited understanding of its valences—that touch in the theatre is usually linked to consent, and that Driscoll's *TYFC* series unfolded during the same years when attention to consent-based theatre practices grew substantially, and intimacy coaching and directing expanded as recognized professional fields in US-based theatre. The organization Intimacy Directors International, for instance, was founded in 2015, evolving into Intimacy Directors & Coordinators shortly thereafter.⁹ Driscoll herself worked with Yehuda Duenyas, an intimacy director, during a developmental phase of *Weathering* (2023), her most recent project. She did so not in service of a representational narrative, but rather as part of the creation of a piece she calls a "multi-sensory flesh sculpture" (New York Live Arts 2023). *Come On In* does not ask the spectator's consent before proposing to *actually* touch us, but provokes a meditation on whether we've agreed to *imagine* being touched, and if we haven't agreed, how we might communicate that boundary to an absent performer. Thus, while the world of naturalistic theatre was foregrounding a conversation about the agreement to be touched—not only in scenes

8. Boberg Doughton's observations on this point were drawn from question-and-answer sessions held with theatre and visual arts students who attended the installation.
 9. Intimacy Directors International was founded by Tonia Sina, Siobhan Richardson, and Alicia Rodis. As Kaja Dunn points out, this work is not new; women of color have been bringing attention to the issue of consent for decades (in Fairfield et al. 2019). I do not suggest here that white women's (and white theatre-makers') burgeoning attention to the topic should accrue more significance, only that it became more widespread in mainstream and white cultural conversation after the election of Trump and in the wake of #MeToo.

depicting intimate encounters but also as a broader ethos for performers to operate by—Driscoll reimagined touch’s meaning when representational forms of contact disappear.

The valences of touch and its relationship to control extend well beyond the power dynamics in theatre, dance, or visual arts to encompass the foundational modes in which we understand what it means to touch or be touched at all. The long history of haptic theory speaks to this. In his 2018 book *Archaeologies of Touch*, David Parisi counters contemporary conceptions of the haptic (those based in, say, consumer electronics or immersive entertainment experiences) by reminding the reader that the term haptic originally referred to a scientific method of control. The 19th-century haptic subject, for instance, was one to be “poked, prodded, shocked, and caressed by scientific instruments, with the goal of revealing the nature of a touch that transcended the confines and particularities of an individual body” (2018:18). Touch has always been social, communal, and public as well as, in some circumstances, private and intimate. But it is only liberatory or resistant to methods of control when it is particularly conceptualized in relation to public space—and sometimes that means deliberately refraining from touch, or making physical bodies unavailable for control.

This lack of availability offers the potential to make touch particularly meaningful in a social mode. In an essay about touch in queer communal spaces, performance theorist Hypatia Vourloumis makes this point: “Touch is integral to the modes of formation of a critical utopian queer commons,” she writes (2015:236). Vourloumis considers how an intentional lack of touch can offer itself as a choreographic means for the living to touch the dead, through a meditation on the origins of the limbo dance. “The limbo is a Trinidadian dance practice where the dancer’s task is to avoid the touch of horizontal planes. [...] This performance of resisting touch embodies a bridge between foundational ground and a transcendental plane” (233, 234). Imagining touch so explicitly without actually touching anything invites a host of considerations about touching what isn’t there—the dead, the living who under pandemic circumstances can be harmed by even casual touch—invokes the theatrical imagination as a space for social but not physical touch. The imagination is important here, because by social touch I do not mean the ecstatic communal contact that can be made in crowds (although social touch can take place in a crowd, or a performance, or at a protest).¹⁰ Rather, I mean intentional contact with a social ethic: in the case of *Come On In*, the deliberate overlap between a comfortably desexualized artistic space and an artistic piece demanding sexual domination, submission, and intimacy. Withstanding this collision, as I see it, might require the listener to consider less the specific relationship with the artist’s vocal persona and more the forms of sexualized dominance inherent to all touch, the ways that abstracting sexualized touch can provide just enough distance to offer a renegotiated relationship to it.

Anyone Can Get Us

In one memorable sequence from the audio tracks, Driscoll asks the listener-participant to visualize themselves in an art gallery—in fact, the Walker’s art gallery, the one directly below the room where she is at present sitting. Having envisioned falling through the floor from Driscoll’s installation into a visual art space, the listener crash-lands on the body of another museumgoer, someone looking around at the visual art on offer down below. The collision of art forms is here made literal: a physical pileup of a performing arts spectator and a visual arts spectator.

Only: this hypothetical visual arts spectator is unhappy. In Driscoll’s words, they are likely to “stumble and stutter and feel like they just don’t *understand* it” (Driscoll 2020a). This phrasing offers common experience, the acknowledgment that we all may, at any time, fail to comprehend the artistic work on offer, and that the more ostensibly elite and likely “abstract” the art is, the

10. Elias Canetti famously elaborates the nature of physical contact among gathered groups in *Crowds and Power* (1962), and there is a rich discourse in performance studies following his discussion of crowd theory. My considerations of social touch are necessarily distinct from this field of thought as I focus on one-on-one forms of contact within artistic institutions.



Figure 6. Faye Driscoll's *Come On In* at Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon, 19 November 2021–15 January 2022. (Photo by Mario Gallucci)

greater the presumed divide between different kinds of art spectators, even those invited to the same building and brought together by a generous Mellon grant structured around bridging the divides between the visual and performing arts (Pyś 2021). The sharpness of this comment, the twinge of mockery, stands up like a tiny ridge in a soft meditative soundscape—a suggestion that we ask ourselves whether we “understand” what Driscoll is saying, but also an affirmation that there is continuity, if only by institutional happenstance, between what Driscoll has created and the ostensibly unrelated visual arts exhibits on display in the floors below.

I dwell on this minor-key moment in Driscoll's narrative because it unites several central concerns: The comment signals Driscoll's consciousness about her institutional interdisciplinarity, the multiple conversations in which she is called upon to intervene simply by occupying a gallery space in a visual arts institution. It signals the assumption of elitism built into the art world and alongside that, the antitheatrical prejudice about bodies, stories, and feelings that emanates, even unintentionally, from every performing arts commission in a visual arts institution. It also signals that, whether we like it or not, the spectators in both gallery and theatre have bodies, and that a collision of bodies—even an imagined one—would potentially rupture any purely optical experience to which the visual arts spectator could aspire.

In contrast, it might seem that Driscoll's living sculptures—participants positioning and repositioning ourselves in response to recorded verbal cues—are the essence of comprehensible, even literal, representation. Anyone can “get” us. And the artists did imagine us as statues of a sort: when the installation toured to PICA, Driscoll described the platforms as pedestals, which, she said, “were all built to different heights and we had originally talked about them being almost replications of museum sculptural bases as seen in traditional gallery spaces” (Driscoll and Havin 2021). But Driscoll's *Come On In* circulated in ways that might not be countenanced in traditional gallery spaces, and its availability in a variety of forms speaks to a kind of ceding of control that offers agency to the spectator but also to the institution, in ways that speak of how (to use Gilbert-Rolfe's phrasing) institutional vernacular structures control.

Morris, too, had juxtaposed abstraction with literal representation, and not only in the soundtrack to *Voice*, which is unavailable unless the entire work is revived in a gallery showing (the artist left instructions that the recordings should be heard only as part of a full installation of *Voice*, and that transcripts should not be made available) (Greisman 2023). Perhaps what is most famous about *Voice*, though, has less to do with its installation than its original advertisement, created by Morris himself: a once-infamous 1974 photo of the artist decked out in what might be read as s/m gear, with a combat helmet on his head and a metal chain girding his shirtless chest. For Morris, this was an intentional reference to wartime violence and not a conscious sexualization of his image or a comment on gender-based control (later, he recalled being surprised to see his poster hanging in a gay bar near the West Side Highway; he'd understood his image as a reference to the war-loving god Mars) (Kitto 2018). Regardless, the projection of power was key. As Anna Chave wrote in "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Morris's work during these years

made manifest an attitude toward the (embodied) viewer that was ambivalent at best, belligerent and malevolent at worst. The public, at times, returned the artist's animosity: his exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in 1971 had to be closed after five days, allegedly to protect the public, but also to protect the work which the public was battering. (1990:57)

The word "embodied" is key: worthy of more than a parenthetical aside, as one cannot "batter" a work of art without exerting one's fully embodied muscular presence.

Or maybe one can. The artist Lynda Benglis confronted both the masculinist implications of Morris's work and the financial conditions of scarcity that allowed it to thrive with an ad she placed in the following issue of *Artforum*, the one after Gilbert-Rolfe's review, which was illustrated with Morris's poster. As Gwen Allen notes in an essay about the politics of the art magazine in the 1970s, responding to the "hypermasculine publicity images" that advertised Morris's and other male artists' work, Benglis requested that a now-iconic photograph of herself, nude except for sunglasses and a large dildo, be published alongside a forthcoming article about her work. Morris was aware of Benglis's project and later referred to the relationship between his poster and her ad as "kind of a competition" (in Kitto 2018). John Coplans, *Artforum*'s editor, refused to run Benglis's image editorially and suggested she instead take out an ad—which she did, and in doing so provoked such violent antagonism from a number of high-profile art critics that they collectively resigned from *Artforum*, and founded the proudly image-free journal *October* instead (Allen 2011:25–26).

Morris's poster ran in an article about his work: in other words, for free. Benglis paid for her response—and then paid again in public opinion, as her advertisement was understood to have made *Artforum* into a kind of "intellectual brothel" (Allen 2011:26) for the promotion of art by any means necessary. Fifty years after the fact, one might be tempted to dismiss such debates as snobbish, prudish, or naïve; but looked at from the vantage point of current questions of touch, consent, and the testy relationship between performance and visual art in the gallery space, they emerge as resonant. The visual conversation between Morris and Benglis has lived on in the work of artists challenging gender bias in the arts: in 2011, the trans artist Cassils created a photographic piece titled *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, which featured their transmasculine body after a period of intensive exercise. Cassils's piece was censored from display in Münster, Germany's railway stations (where it had been advertising a local art exhibition) after transit authorities realized the poster depicted a trans body: "they had deduced that I was assigned female at birth, and therefore my chiseled chest was actually pornographic breasts," wrote Cassils (Cassils 2023).

In Driscoll's piece, queerness is intentional and ever-present; it is neither signaled inadvertently as with Morris's poster, nor explicitly, in Cassils's response. For Driscoll, abstraction provided a means of keeping sexualized bodies solely in the spectator's imagination, rather than asking them to constitute—as they arguably did for Morris—one end of a conceptual rope stretching tautly between the installation's refusal to represent the sexualized body and the poster's oversaturated representation of the same. This makes, I argue, Driscoll's piece an argument for touch as a social phenomenon that does not disavow the sexual valences touch can have, but rather constructs



Figure 7. Faye Driscoll's *Come On In* at Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon, 19 November 2021–15 January 2022. (Photo by Mario Gallucci)

a space where the sexualized imagination can flow, or not, as the listener chooses. Social touch requires an acknowledgment of connection among strangers that is not dependent on personal affection or intimacy. It bestows meaning on a lack of touch and on contact at a distance—phenomena that became essential actions, as Sarah Lucie has written, during the Covid-19 pandemic and racial justice movement of the past three years (Lucie 2021).

Like Benglis, and unlike Morris, Driscoll's piece also participates in an economy of circulation that requires flexibility and the surrender of control over precisely how the artwork is received. Performance almost always requires this. *Come On In* kept touring, to Seattle's On the Boards Festival in October 2021 and to PICA that November through the following January. On the Boards and PICA worked together on the project, fabricating the pedestals in Seattle and driving them in a U-Haul, accompanied by the production manager from On the Boards, to Portland for installation (Boberg Doughton 2023). The lighting design was accomplished remotely, with Driscoll watching on Zoom and providing feedback in conversation with the production manager from On the Boards. Together, Driscoll, the PICA staff, and the On the Boards' production manager worked to create visual continuity from the Walker through On the Boards to PICA, adjusting spatial relationships and lighting choices in PICA's 10,000-square-foot space, where the installation was surrounded by columns and a perimeter of empty space rather than hugged by gallery walls as in the Walker (Boberg Doughton 2023). *Choreographies for the Living and the Dead* continued to circulate online, hosted by the Walker as well as other sites (such as the Berlin Tanz Im August festival for contemporary dance) that had planned to present the full installation, but were prevented by the pandemic.

Following the Covid shutdowns, Driscoll presented iterations of the *Guided Choreography for the Living and the Dead* soundtracks on a variety of online platforms, including the Tanz im August festival (Driscoll 2020b). The digital-only version of *Guided Choreography* includes a spare visual interface reminiscent of the spare gallery setting and aligned with Driscoll's instruction to the listener to "resist evaluating things visually." In the rectangular frame of a web page, soft lavenders

and yellows pulse in and out as the listener is instructed to become comfortable, submit to Driscoll's instructions—and possibly surprisingly (in at least some of the audio tracks), to imagine Driscoll submitting to them (Driscoll 2020b). During Covid conditions, Vaughan and Margolin constructed a literal safety net so that Driscoll could perform *Thank You for Coming: Space* without requiring spectators to touch her. Emerging from a complicated collective ethos developed over the six years of the trilogy's creation, Driscoll avoids nostalgia for physical touch, acknowledging that touch always involves power and domination, never more so than at a time when touch, if not rigorously conceptualized as a social phenomenon, could become instead a deadly one. Anyone can “get” Driscoll, and, as she says, anyone can “take me.” But, importantly, no one has to.

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