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Soft to the Touch: Performance, Vulnerability, and Entanglement in the Time of Covid

By Jennifer Torrence, with reflective contributions by Ellen Ugelvik and three audience-participants.

Contact is Crisis

We do not have control over the future, nor the ability to predict its trajectories—and we never have. If we didn't know it before the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps we know it now: rather than autonomous individuals, we are instead interconnected and codependent beings intertwined in a precarious web of relations. We were always-already vulnerable to each other and to outside forces far beyond our control. From the perspective of my music practice as a contemporary music percussionist and performer, and as a researcher in the project entitled Performing Precarity, this text seeks to unpack how the increased vulnerability revealed by COVID-19 has played a role in both disrupting and clarifying aspects of our research questions, specifically around musical works that investigate physical touch and human-to-human contact.

Performing Precarity is a project investigating instability, vulnerability, and risk of collapse in contemporary music performance. At the start of the project in Autumn 2019, I was interested in exploring the dissolution of the musician's sense of control through an insistence on mutual vulnerability in performance, and specifically through the performance of works that involve bodily entanglement and/or networks of instruments. The motivation behind this lies in the hypothesis that precariousness can emerge in the performer's choice (or coercion) to surrender their sense of "I" and "mine", and instead to give into the reality

of interconnectedness. This loss of sovereignty, as it were, is a loss of the ability to pursue acts of self-preservation, the instinct to protect one's self from exposure. The following research questions have guided the research: "What would a musical practice without the instinct for self-preservation, without the instinct to be impenetrable and impervious to failure, look and sound like? In other words, how might 'porosity', being open and vulnerable to outside forces, be my practice in music performance?". These questions are motivated by a wish to dismantle pervading cultures around perfection and the virtuoso-master-hero trope in classical music. Attempts to self-preserve in classical music include tactics such as rehearsing for the purpose of removing unpredictability (drilling and repeating), practicing for the purposes of "dominating" an instrument or score in order to guard one's self against the vulnerabilities caused by what can be called the "now" of musical performance (which naturally involves other human beings and agents), as well as battling nerves through the consumption of pills such as beta-blockers. Instead of insisting on mastery through training and drilling, I instead seek out a practice that relishes experiences of losing control through submission to outside forces and a cultivation of trust amidst the discomfort.

In theory this question can be approached by any musician with any music practice. My own artistic practice is grounded in contemporary music and therefore the examples that will follow in this exposition come from this tradition, with a particular focus on performances of the compositions *music for two players I* (1963), by Mieko Shiomi, *Koral (Etude III)* (2014), by Jeppe Ernst, and *Soundtouch* (2017), by Wojtek Blecharz. As a method I have chosen to focus on works which remove the traditional and conventional physical distance between performers and/or audience to search for a tactile and/or sensual experience of interconnectedness and mutual vulnerability, often through real human contact. However it is worth noting that these ideas and sensations are just as present in more traditional instrumental works, where vulnerability is recognized via an energetic porousness brought on by listening and awareness of others (both human and non-human). Percussionist Steven Schick speaks of his touch-based artform as a conduit to "everywhere and everything". Every time he touches his drum he comes in contact with generations of musical ancestors, as well as the life of the animal whose skin is stretched across the frame of the drum (Schick, 2017).[1] One potential step for the research to take would be an investigation into what the implications are if a musician actively brings in the experiences of entanglement that are so concretely on display in these three works, and applies them to pieces that don't explore relational topics as explicitly. For the purposes of this exposition, however, these three works, which not only illuminate relationality between people through physical proximity and touch, but also carry a certain "therapeutic" quality, will remain the frame of this discussion.

At the start of this research project we could never have predicted the ultimate loss of

[1] "When I first touched a drum as a child in a small Iowa town, I also touched the lives of my musical ancestors — drummers, most of whose names we no longer know, who centuries ago played under the starry skies of West Africa or escorted a funeral march in New Orleans or, like my great grandfather, led a regiment of Mr. Lincoln's army into battle. I also touched the life of the animal that gave its skin, and held in my hand the tree that was felled to make the shell. Percussion was my outward-bound conduit to everywhere and everything."

control that COVID-19 would present, namely the fear of sickness, the inability to plan or predict daily life much less long-term goals, the inability to work or live as one is used to, the fear of economic ruin. And with this loss of control, COVID-19 also revealed in even clearer terms that, as Maggie Nelson puts it, "Precariousness is the condition... that unites us all" (2011, 203). As individuals, as communities, and also as nation states, we are all vulnerable to the precarious situation that this global pandemic has caused. From the perspective of this research project, this turn of events was both incredibly disruptive and deeply revealing. From one perspective the pandemic reconfirmed the hypothesis that we are all interconnected, an idea that has also been brought forward by ecologists for decades and by certain spiritual practices for centuries. It also confirmed that this mutual vulnerability is unavoidable (despite border closures and travel bans). These confirmations also provided a certain urgency in the research to explore in which ways codependency might be generative in an artistic practice. But from another perspective the devastation caused by COVID-19 and our permanent state of interconnectedness problematizes this research's quest to *advocate* for vulnerability as a method for renewal and grounding of an artistic practice. Covid has also forced a recognition that there are clearly limits to what a practice can withstand before it *actually collapses*. The pandemic has highlighted the very nature of the root word of the research project Performing Precarity, "precariousness": that which is dangerously likely to fail or collapse, but which has *not yet done so*. The extreme situation of the pandemic has thus refocused the research, especially in terms of pieces where physical touch is involved, to not go as far as the true failure of bodily harm or disease, but to nonetheless recognize the vital, liminal, and precarious space inherent to being close to another person. As poet and essayist Anne Carson puts it, "As members of society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another—whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional, or imaginary. Contact is crisis" (2000, 130).

One consequence of the pandemic is that it has made performance nearly impossible, and thus there are clear complications for a project specifically focused on human contact in performance. During the period of April - November 2020, I was scheduled to perform several different projects that appeared to display the complexity of intimacy between performers and audience, including *c* by Simon Løffler (for three percussionists and audience bone conduction, 2013), *Soundtouch* by Wojtek Blecharz (for solo percussionist and 4 blindfolded audience-participants, 2017), *music for two players I* by Mieko Shiomi (for two performers at varying proximity to each other, 1963), *Koral (Etude III)* by Jeppe Ernst (for two hand-holding performers using only their facial muscles, 2014) and *Rerendered* by Simon Steen-Andersen (for pianist and two assistants performing inside the piano, 2003). These pieces were chosen because they display the "image" of entanglement through their scenographic distribution of instruments, performers, and audience, as well as their concrete enactment of interconnectedness through collective music making, shared instruments, and bodily touch. In the time of covid, however, these pieces, with their demand for close proximity and human-to-human contact, became dangerous and even life-threatening. There would be no possibility of maintaining a 1-meter-plus distance between performers and/or audience, and thus no possibility of avoiding dire health consequences. In an attempt to transgress traditional boundaries of proximity to the audience and between musicians, our artform had become a health threat. Where does this situation leave these works? Does covid rule them out (at least for the time being) and/or does it heighten their

relevance? Even for the purpose of this exposition considerations and adaptations had to be made. Do these adaptations hinder and/or heighten the condition of vulnerability we experience in connection to others? Do these performances manage to remain in that precarious space of interconnectedness without threatening our health and wellbeing?

All contacts are contagions

For anthropologist Ernest Crawley, "all contact is a modified blow" (1960, 78). Not only is contact risky, for Crawley it is inherently violent. It makes an *impact* to be in contact with an-other. This impact can be lasting, and can even change the composition of a human being due to the transmission of disease as well as other non-pathological human characteristics. Siri Hustvedt takes it one step further and suggests that the skin that receives the blow of physical contact offers a false sense of autonomy between human beings. For Hustvedt, the skin is the very entity that allows us to differentiate between "I'"and "you": "How do I know that I am I and you are you? Each one of us is enclosed in an envelope of skin. Each one of us feels the movements of his or her body in the world as "mine"" (2016, 370). This suggests that the touching of skin involves the inevitable crossing of an existential barrier, potentially assaulting notions of the autonomous individual.

Covid has made us all painfully aware of just how illusory the boundary of the skin as a separation between individuals truly is. Many can now relate to the feeling of apprehension at the physical touch of an-other: even a close friend or family member can pose a threat not only to personal safety but also to the restart of entire nation-states and economies after strict lockdown. During covid, safety means battening down the hatches and becoming impenetrable. Like many others, I have found myself opening my apartment building's front door with rubber gloves on and apologizing to close friends if I accidentally touched them arm-to-arm while on a walk around the neighborhood. Direct contact and even the sharing of everyday surfaces, like door handles, has become both dangerous and taboo. In the spring of 2020, many of Oslo's residents navigated their daily lives with a fog of suspicion around them: questioning with darting eyes if the person they were passing on the street, or sharing a line in the grocery store, or sitting next to them on a bus, was contagion-free and handling the situation responsibly. The feeling of 'mine' that Husvedt describes, a sensation reinforced by the false sense of impenetrable boundaries at the barrier of my skin, at the walls of my home, and at the borders of my resident nation became so clearly illusory, so unstable. At the same time, however, protecting these porous boundaries continues to be our best protection against coronavirus. At the very moment there seems to be a collective recognition of our interconnectedness and vulnerability, there is also a call to, quite literally, lose touch with other human beings.

For Crawley, not only is contact a "blow"; he further states that "all contacts are contagions" (1960, 81). His choice of the word contagion is curious. All contacts being contagions, including touch, conversation, eye contact, suggests that we are not only susceptible to the transmission of viruses and bacteria, but we are also vulnerable to their human traits and conditions. Whether they are diseases or other properties, these blows of contact pass contagions through the porous surface of our skin and our person, infiltrating our system—for better or for worse. Crawley continues his anthropological line of thinking thus: "Using

the language of contagion, as more convenient, for primitive man does not distinguish between transmission of disease and transmission of all other states and properties, we find that practically every human quality or condition can be transferred to others" (1960, 91). Crawley offers the example of how in some cultures it has been observed that a person may wear the bone of a dead warrior, hoping to "catch" the honor and bravery of the deceased. The 21st century citizen can surely relate to this notion of wanting to "catch" human traits from another person, especially from someone who is seen as larger than life, even god-like. This is clearly present when watching footage of sports stars like Michael Jordan walking through large crowds with dozens of hands clambering across barriers to touch their fingertips against his skin. It is a gesture of love and respect and it is also an attempt to touch greatness, and perhaps to even "contract" a bit for themselves.

Mieko Shiomi's 1963 work, *music for two players I,* creates a space for two performers to directly experience Crawley's notion that all contacts have the characteristic of a violent "blow", that they are contagious, and that transmission occurs through all types of contact, including eye contact. In Shiomi's piece, the only instruction for the two players is to stare into each other's eyes at five different proximities to each other, ranging from 0.5 meters to 6 meters and for the total duration of twenty minutes. The performance in the video accompanying this text was performed by Ellen Ugelvik and myself in December 2020. This performance shows signs of covid precaution: we performed outdoors so that we would be able to perform safely without masks. (We wanted to keep our faces uncovered so that we might be more fully available to each other in the act of transmitting eye contact and energetic communication.) We placed a plexiglass panel between us so that we could stand safely in front of each other at the close proximities of 1 and 0.5 meters. Ugelvik and I both write in our reflections, which can be found within this exposition, that despite being able to see through the transparent plexiglass, we both experienced the barrier between us as an inhibitor of our gaze. But even with this barrier, Ugelvik and I both express a certain experience of "giving and receiving", as if our eyes were sending out and penetrating the other's being, and likewise, that we were receiving from the other, as if our eyes behave like the pores on our skin, receiving freely and without any mode of protection.

What Ugelvik and I describe in our reflections is no less than our attempts at dialogue and understanding via an unspeakable communication. From the outside perspective of the viewer however, different interpretations can emerge, and it is unclear what is possible to interpret in the video documentation accompanying this text. Seemingly confirming Crawley's description of contact as a violent blow, artist Lea Tetrick, who documented this performance, remarked that we looked like "warriors" and described Ugelvik's gaze as "fierce". In our own reflections, Ugelvik and I discuss our personal struggles to remain open and vulnerable to the other. Rather than on the verge of attack, we seem to struggle more with the notion of surrender. Complex inner worlds surge between us both, with the slightest variations unfolding with the changing proximity of our bodies. Bruce Ellis Benson describes the conditions for dialogue as relying on a certain tension that both parties hold, like the way a string instrument holds tension between its pegs: "In the same way that instruments are tuned on the basis of tension, so the relationship of musical partners depends on tension to be maintained" (2003, 170). He continues, noting that in fact the fierceness that Tetrick picked up on is an example of what is essential for dialogue and mutual vulnerability: "The danger for genuine dialogue, then, is not the *presence* of tension

but its loss or imbalance. A dialogue is only possible when each person *both* holds the others in tension—that is, holds the other accountable—*and* feels the tension of accountability exerted by the other" (2003, 171). The variations and sensations Ugelvik and I reflect upon are evidence of such attempts at holding the necessary and sometimes uncomfortable tension of dialogue. Our reflections reveal a wild internal dance: softness and struggle situated in an endless, silent stare.

Entangled bodies

Shiomi's duet systematically unveils possible ways in which our proximity to another person heightens our sense of corporeal and energetic entanglement. However, throughout her work, exposure to physical touch is left out, but perhaps it is exactly here, on our skin, that notions of mutual vulnerability become even more concrete. For the skin is porous, freely giving and receiving energy, vibrations, and nutrition, and also more dangerous particles. "[M]ingling bodies are potentially impure and dangerous" (Husvedt, 2016, 286) and the site of skin, like all transitional spaces, is risky, not least due to "the stuff that leaks through corporeal boundaries" (ibid., 285). The skin's porousness presents a kind of vulnerability to the other in the form of bodily and energetic contamination. Mary Douglas explains this contamination thus, "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kinds. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body" (1966, 121). The boundaries of our bodies are structurally designed to be transgressed, and every touch confronts and confirms our everlasting and mutual vulnerability.

Works that entail bodily mingling, entanglement, and touch are increasingly prevalent in experimental music. Many composers, including Francois Sarhan, Yiran Zhao, Simon Løffler, Jeppe Ernst, Liv Kristin Holmberg, to name a few, have invested much of their musical output to questions regarding human-to-human contact. However within the context of the research project Performing Precarity I had begun to doubt if such pieces truly point to an area of precariousness in the field of music performance. It was not until COVID-19 stopped the world in March 2020 that I understood that there is without a doubt serious personal (and therefore musical) risk in physical touch. Although physical interaction is a foundation to our understandings of other performing arts practices, such as certain forms of theatre, dance, and performance art, music is not traditionally understood as an artform based on human-to-human touch. In western classical music there is a performance practice convention of keeping our distance. In most cases, each instrumentalist remains at their "station" throughout a work or even an entire concert, abstaining from any risk of corporeal mixture with other agents. With the exception of hearing, which is an act of physical touch (the touch of sound waves physically hitting the walls of the ear) audiences also traditionally keep their physical distance in the conventional concert situation, especially regarding the bodies of the performing musicians.

Countering these conventions, the composers listed above, as well as others, attempt to remove and challenge traditional barriers between performers and audiences. This move is often done to create the conditions for a "new" experience or perspective on relationships to

sound and the body. In the case of audience-performer relations, the nature of this interaction is often uneven: the performer knows more than the audience about the proceedings of the musical event, and thus the audience could be seen as "more" vulnerable in the situation. However, it is worth remembering that the performer was always vulnerable to the blow of contact with the audience, always susceptible to the audience members' traits and conditions, as well as their expectations. All of these aspects of the audience members affect the performance and the piece—as well as the experience for the performer. Regardless of which parties do or do not have information about the proceedings of the works, notions of vulnerability are shared by the performers and audience alike.

The reality of this shared vulnerability for performers and audiences was emphasized in discussions with Wojtek Blecharz about the possibility of remounting *Soundtouch* in Berlin in the summer of 2020. The piece involves a solo percussionist and four blind-folded audience-participants who lay on their backs, one at each cardinal direction, with their heads towards the center of the room. They are surrounded with percussion instruments of all shapes and sizes, which are mostly hidden from their view upon their entry into the space. Over the course of the piece, instrumental objects and sounds are brought very close, and even into the hands of the four audience members. This close physical experience for the audience is precisely the motivation of the work: cymbals and crotales are struck and physically swung over the heads of the audience, emphasizing spatial listening. Wooden planks are laid across the hips of the audience members and china cymbals are balanced on the sternum of the audience before they are struck in percussive waves and rhythms that vibrate through their bones and bodies. At the climax of the piece the physical proximity between the audience participants is further transgressed when the performer places an instrument in one hand of each audience member, and a mallet in the other hand. Each person is instructed through physical guidance by the performer (due to their blindfolded disorientation) to strike the instrument their neighbor is holding out towards them. The process creates a ring of arms: one arm hitting the object percussively and the other receiving the impulse from their neighbor's strike. This is the most blatant moment of the piece revealing its ultimate goal of creating a ritualistic space for interconnectedness through impact and instrumental vibrations. Indeed, a unique aspect of *Soundtouch* is how it makes concrete the similarity between sonic vibrations pressing against and through our bodies and the energetic connections felt when sharing a space with others.

Cultivating Discomfort

Beyond the vulnerability of physical touch, *Soundtouch* also faces the exposure inherent to participation and sharing space, which ultimately destabilizes the piece itself. In this work, the percussionist is at times a soloist, but is even more often a kind of facilitator in providing the necessary instruments to each audience member who will then perform and play the instruments themselves. In this case, the audience is actually responsible for the overall sonic result, which is completely dependent on the four of them to fulfill and shape alongside the percussionist. One example of this is in the second major section of the piece, when each person is handed different kinds of rattles and ratchets. The performer gives the audience member the object and, through strategies of touch (without verbal communication), invites them to play (for) themselves. In this way, the piece can, and maybe should, be conceptualized as a quintet for five percussionists, four of whom are

blindfolded, the fifth behaving as a kind of sorcerer, mysteriously conjuring unseen (but completely felt and heard) worlds. *Soundtouch* is an interesting example of how the audience can be particularly vulnerable to the performer's control, and also of how the performer is vulnerable to each audience member's personality and reactions to the tasks they are given. Furthermore, the piece itself is impacted by each individual and how they contribute musically to the work. Such a piece results in performance of varying degrees of musical "quality", however for Blecharz the quality of the piece lies precisely in the performer and audience's ability and willingness to connect with one another, to the sound, and to the instruments in their hands.

My experience of performing *Soundtouch* in many ways echoes Jamaica Kincaid's descriptions of attempting to tame her garden in *My Garden (Book)* (1999). In the first chapter of her beautiful prose she laments again and again at the way the flowers don't obey her visions and how furry creatures (a fox, a rabbit) intrude "her" space. In the final chapter of *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanisms and Decolonial Entanglements* (2017), Julietta Singh reflects on "cultivation, discomfort, and the cultivation of discomfort" in the work of Kincaid, and in particular Kincaid's ambivalent relationship to this unruly garden life. Singh's reading suggests that Kincaid's discomfort in part stems from her deep wish to "master" her garden: for each blossom to bloom at the exact right moment in the year (and not in the wrong season!), or for blossoms to point in a particular direction (she has an ongoing battle with a certain wisteria). But Kincaid also deeply understands that she will never be able to master something which has a mind of its own, such as her garden. Her prose offers a powerful meditation on an ambivalence born of a wish to master in combination with deeply loving the essential struggle that forever hinders and stalls that mastery. In one unforgettable scene, Kincaid laments that a fox has entered "her" garden. It had "startled" her and forced her to consider different ways to scare it away. She ponders "what to do?" about that fox, it was "her" garden after all! But the fox just looked back at her with an air of self confidence that suggested it was totally unaffected by Kincaid's threats. In a similar moment a baby rabbit enters the garden and, just as the fox had done before, "startles" Kincaid. Kincaid doesn't mind that the rabbit ate a few bits of her garden, but she does consider the rabbit "a pest...because sometimes, when I did not expect him, he would suddenly hop into my view, startling me out of some worry or other…" (1999, 19).

Much like I experienced when performing *Soundtouch*, but certainly the same is true performing any piece of music, I have a certain ambivalence to the performance situation. I want everything to be just *so*, just as I had envisioned it, just as I had rehearsed it! But the performance situation is full of intruders: the audience-participants, a crying baby, a broken instrument, the look of Ellen Ugelvik from across the room that "startles" me out of what I had intended to worry about (my performance!). Sometimes when an audience does or plays something I find distasteful while performing *Soundtouch*, I find myself echoing Kincaid's refrain: "What to do?" But I also see that it is exactly these uncomfortable moments, where "my" space has been "invaded" and "transgressed", that the elusive sense of presence springs forth. It says "NOW!", and I have no choice but to respond to it, to receive those blows of contact. All other plans must be put on hold, or better yet, forgotten. And it is in these moments that I understand my own fallacy of ever believing a certain mastery or control over "my" space was possible. As Singh puts it, "It is the garden, and its unwelcome inhabitants, that reveal to the gardener the fantasmatic nature of the sovereign

subject" (2017, 170). For it is the concert space, the space that is shared with other performers, audience, technologies, and instruments, a space much like Kincaid's garden, "rife with unexpected visitors and "willful" species", that so profoundly reveals not only my own vulnerability but also, as for Kincaid, my "fraught constitution as a porously bounded subject" (ibid). So it is exactly this state of discomfort where a performer might find new experiences or understandings. For is it not true that, as Bruce Ellis Benson illuminates, "The 'ideal' composer, performer, or listener is one who is really ready to encounter an other who (as Gadamer puts it) 'breaks into my ego-centeredness and gives me something to understand'" (2003, 167)?

Taboo of Touch

What I want as a performer is to be broken into, to be startled out of some worry or other, and to find new understandings inside that vulnerability. It is in that vulnerability that I believe I can undo my urge to master, my instinct to control, my dream of sovereignty. COVID-19, however, has tested the parameters and conditions of "being broken into" that a person can reasonably withstand. It has forced us to reflect on our understandings of discomfort, versus that of real danger. It has underlined the reality and relevance of our interconnectedness at the same time as it has heightened our fear of the consequences of that mutual vulnerability. It is in this paradox, this uncomfortable place, that I believe we can begin to understand the relevance of these pieces and practices.

This exposition attempts to sit in this paradox and to try to trace certain modes of vulnerability in contemporary music performance—from human contact via eye contact and touch, to the precarious negotiation of shared space—and to reflect on how these encounters might breed new understandings and new knowledge. The reader will find videos of *Soundtouch, music for two players I*, and *Koral (Etude III)*, all performed with the safety of COVID-19 precautions. Each performance involves participants from my personal cohort. This selected audience appears to be the only responsible context in which to present such pieces at this time. Despite these efforts, performing this type of work in 2020 and 2021 feels like a clear act of transgression. The works seem to carry a certain sense of taboo, and perhaps rightfully so. From another perspective, the possibility for shared experiences and human-to-human connection seems more crucial than ever.

Each of the works were selected for the methods by which they create heightened awareness of others through physical proximity and touch, the removal/emphasis of particular senses, and approaches to human interactivity. What might such works feel like to us now, as they force us to come so close to one another? How might these works be read in the context of a global pandemic? In what ways might their transgressive blow of human contact even more acutely reveal our always-already mutual vulnerability? Perhaps the total impact of these works and their relation to covid will only be felt once this pandemic and the taboo of touch has passed. For it will only be then that we can safely test our new understandings of the precariousness that unites us all, as well as the generative, albeit ambivalent, state of cultivated discomfort that these works create. Because the vitality of our blurry and thrillingly risky codependency flourishes only when the fallout of collapse is scary, but not deadly.

Ellen Ugelvik, Reflection:

When Lea said “Go” for filming the performance of *music for two players I* by Mieko Shiomi and I met Jennifer’s eyes, I suddenly felt that I was not able to perform the piece. The composition has an intensity that I had not really grasped while preparing for the piece in advance. I am quite shy as a person, and meeting people’s eyes has always been a little uncomfortable for me, especially over a long duration of time - except with children.

In the beginning of the performance my eyes needed to adjust to the “staring”, so I was blinking very much to adjust. It was a bit windy and cold, so the eyes became wet. Jen looked very determined, and at the same time young and vulnerable. What kind of energy came from her? How much would I be willing to take in from her, how vulnerable did I myself dare to be? Would that be the core of the performance?

Meeting her eyes was hard the first couple of minutes. I wanted to scratch my face, look away or laugh. But after some time a sense of empathy towards her arose. Parts of conversations we have had, thoughts she shared came back to me, and her appearance in the winter jacket and the very big scarf filled me with warmth towards her. Her wonderful energy and strength were suddenly less prominent since we were stripped of the ability to make conversation.

The evening before I had done a meditation on connecting body parts towards places in a room and gaining energy from “the line”.[1] By sensing a body part that I normally did not focus much on, what it contains (fluids, bones, skin, hair) and then trying to imagine a spot in the room in the same way, the tactility of the spot, colors, smell – gave a possibility to create vibrations between body and space. I tried to connect with Jen in the same way, to create active contact between us, so that the performance should be less static. I connected our palms, my hands with her ears and my fingers were touching her glasses. I tried to connect some body parts to sounds from the surroundings that appeared at the location. This method partly worked, sometimes it felt a bit like I made a “strategy” for avoiding the precariousness of “just being”, whatever that is...

After some time I could enjoy a warm energy coming from within and my breath was quite free. I felt that the project was intriguing and strong in its purity. I love being very concentrated and I remembered a session with a coach some years ago. We worked on visualizing different work scenarios and gaining ownership to the particular energies I wanted to fill the situations with. One element was to open up for a certain “vibrating glow” to flow from my back towards my partners without being afraid to lose my own grounding. In the performance of *music for two players I* I wanted to embrace Jen in that way through my gaze, to help her carry the weight of “being in the world”, that we were a unity for the duration of this performance.

After the performance Lea stated that we had looked like two warriors!

I did not count seconds, but tried to imagine the duration in each position without “clinging” to starting and stopping. Four minutes is a long stretch,

but as has often happened before in performances that are demanding, suddenly the duration feels "weightless", not exhausting. I am a person without any sense of direction, I often get lost in buildings or in the woods. This is sometimes a problem and haunts me in my dreams, but before the summer I was working with an artist that stated that this was an artistic quality![2] She called the phenomenon "freedom of directions" (*retningsfrihet*). In our performance I tried to "free" time in a way, I wanted to energize the space and myself, not "stiffening" in the positions, to be inside of the form of the composition. I attempted to stretch the performance, to see it from a bird's perspective from a distance very far up. I saw Jen and me and Lea filming on a cloudy day in Oslo before Christmas 2020 as mini figures under a ceiling of plastic fabric. And I urged myself to establish contact with my feet and the platform we were standing on and the earth under it. It is historical ground we filmed on, Akershus castle, which kings and queens have frequented for more than 700 years and where prisoners have suffered the strongest punishment in the history of Norway.

Was this another strategy to get away from the willingness to expose my own vulnerability to Jen? Perhaps. Some days I do not want to go in depth with what is complicated and precarious in my life. It is there and I know it so well. And in which way, when we perform, is exposition of our vulnerability a quality or a "must" for getting in contact with the audience, our fellow performers, our instruments or our selves? Do we "give" or "receive" when we perform? Are we "ourselves" or do we have a "stage personality", and how does that matter? Who am I when I am not producing sound and how dependent am I on the listening and music making when performing?

There were some noise/city sounds that took my attention away from the actual performance, I would imagine that a performance in a silent hall indoors would be a lot more demanding and also stronger in many ways.

In the *music for two players* I felt that after some time I gained strength from the situation, I got energy from being there with Jen. I thought that she looked quite troubled somehow.

Suddenly the plexiglass between us fell down on the ground. It was shocking, funny and absurd. At that time I started to feel a bit comfortable in the situation, we were coming to the end, but without the plexiglass the attention between us was 100% increasing, even standing six meters apart. That sensation made this a Corona performance that revealed what we all know so well know and are so tired of!

December 2020

[1] The meditation was created and led by Kristin Ryg Helgebostad
[2] Janne-Camilla Lyster

Jennifer Torrence, Reflection:

Sometimes I wonder what drives me to perform. It's a terrifying idea. Public humiliation is always waiting around the bend. Of course, there is also the thrill of the risk, like a daredevil plunging from a great height. And it can also be glorious when the performance is successful. But for me there is always an amount of nerves (a primordial expression of fear) that I must overcome. So what is it about actually? To be seen? To be applauded? And in doing those actions on stage and receiving that attention and praise do I fulfill something in myself that I haven't been able to fulfill otherwise? Of course I love the material of music and instrumental playing and performance, but this is something that is unstable. (Sometimes I like the material more or less. Sometimes I feel more connected, or less connected. It's something that changes as one ages and changes, but it's also something that can change from day to day.) For sure I have a certain ambivalent relationship to performance, manifesting as a discomfort that I deeply crave. (Perhaps this ambivalence is the very thing that makes it vital?). But sometimes I wonder if the public exposure is a kind of strategy for therapy, both personal and social: an arena to face things that are simply too difficult to face if not forced into the situation. My initial feeling is to be very suspicious of performance as therapy.

What can I make of the choice to program the Mieko Shiomi *music for two players I*? It's all about exposure: to the other performer, but also to a potential audience (but we didn't get to try this) who is allowed to look at us simply standing and staring for 20 minutes. I'm not sure what I expected out of this exposure process, but it did feel like it was an opportunity to take a step closer to Ellen and to get to know the other in a different way, so that perhaps our musical partnership could be enriched. It was also imagined as an experiment in looking for some kind of "real" vulnerability. Not the vulnerability of an imperfect instrument (such as a harmonica not sounding at the right time), or getting separated from a colleague in a musical passage. Something more essential, the simplistic vulnerability of a person looking back at me looking back at them, without any instrumental extension or abstraction.

What can Shiomi mean by the title, *music for two players I*? The form is extremely clear. It has a duration of 20 minutes, which is divided into 5 equal parts. In each of the 5 parts we stand facing each other at a prescribed distance to the other for a total of 4 minutes. The piece starts at a "neutral position" of 3 meters apart. Across the first 12 minutes of the piece the two players slowly move closer to each other, eventually reaching the closest distance of 0.3 meters apart. At 12 minutes the two players move away from each other to a distance of 6 meters apart, the longest distance. At 16 minutes the final position is reached at 0.5 meter apart. The only instruction is to stare into the eyes of the other. I experience the first 3/5ths of the piece as a kind of zooming in on the other person, and then, when at 6 meters apart, there is a kind of birds-eye view suddenly, a feeling of seeing the whole person, not just their face, but also the whole body situated in a landscape (or a concrete outdoor stage in the middle of a fortress at winter). There is also a feeling of searching, of trying to hold the same focus that was achieved at 0.3 meters apart. And then finally, at 0.5 meter distance, a reunion, a renewed sense of closeness, a new perspective on long studied materials.

Throughout the first part of our performance I felt stiff and I wasn't sure what to make of Ellen's expression. When we started I was very nervous. My heart was beating faster than in normal performance. I clearly felt threatened somehow, and unsure of how this would go. (When I tested this piece with my partner Inga I had a very emotional response, so I wasn't sure what to make of this new version, would it be scary to be that emotional in front of Ellen? Would it be a failure if I don't feel those emotions?) When I looked at Ellen I felt that she was performing for me. She had a certain "new music face", on the one hand a certain hardness and determination, on the other hand a focus and an enviable 'neutrality'. I tried to stare into her eyes and to see her there, but her eyes seemed hard to me, difficult to penetrate, to understand, and thus they became objects, big and brown, glassy, and immovable. It made me feel safe, like she maybe wasn't really looking at me (since her eyes seemed like objects), and maybe she wouldn't really see me.

(When we started there was a lot of blinking from both of us. I wondered if this is what Shiomi meant by "music" for two players. It reminded me of other pieces, for example by Jeppe Ernst, *Koral*, which sets movements of the face (such as opening and closing the eyes, lifting and lowering the eyebrows) into musical notation (in some way this piece explores similar phenomena but from a totally opposite vantage point: instead the eyes are shut and the two performers hold hands to communicate timing and presence); and also other works by Shiomi (*<event for the midday> (in the sunlight)* [1963]), where blinking is both a kind of rhythmic musicality but also a way of seeing the eyes as a camera lens: mechanical and constantly in adjustment.)

Because I gradually felt safe, that I wouldn't be exposed, or that if Ellen saw something in me she would never show it in her face, and maybe never mention it, I could relax into my body, breathing deeply as I do in my qigong practice, keeping the breath and energy circulating from head to toe. Ellen and I had discussed some ideas around sending energy out, a practice I have been cultivating with qigong by sending energy from the three centers, or *dantien*, at the head, chest, and hips of the body. I tried to send energy towards Ellen through these three centers, but felt deeply that it was a distraction from the simplicity of the task at hand. I even wondered if I was distracting myself with simply keeping the breath moving in my body. But it was also extremely cold that day, which had the effect of bringing me back into my body all of the time, even when I wished to stay with Ellen.

I wondered what Ellen was thinking about, if she was distracted by the noises around, or enjoying it, what she thought of this whole thing. I felt in a way that I had the "upper hand" in the piece, because I knew slightly more about it having tested it with Inga. But I have to say that the test did nothing more than expose the duration of the piece (20 minutes can be a long time). There is no way to know what will happen when two different people are standing across from each other in such a stripped back and focused setting. With Ellen, because her look had a certain hardness to it, which is foreign to how I experience her gaze in "real life", I found myself almost beckoning her to release her guard, almost willing her with my look to release something. I tried to soften behind my own eyes even more. Not because I wanted or needed tears or laughter (as I had experienced with Inga), but to make room for those subtle nuances that come in the look of another. In this way, I was perhaps being too controlling. I tried to release these wishes and expectations. I also had a sense

that my efforts were not being received, but perhaps I was misjudging her energy and expression: I experience Ellen to be quite solid and heavy energetically. She is rooted to the ground and has a slowness, a deliberateness to her, which I think is a big reason for why she is such a powerful performer. A rootedness. It never felt like a stand-off (like Lea experienced it to be), but I did experience it as something more controlled than my previous experience with Inga, (but I think this is to be expected!).

When the shield fell down in the middle of the piece, when we were standing at 6 meters apart, I finally felt a real clarity of vision. There she was, no screen between us obstructing our view. The connection was much stronger and the feeling of effortlessly seeing Ellen finally came. How strange that this sensation came when we were standing at our greatest distance to each other. In the last section of the piece, when we came to 0.5 meters from each other I felt that we had both finally relaxed. Perhaps because of the shield falling just before, perhaps also because of the form of the piece. There was finally an ease in my body and also in Ellen's face. A sense of humor. A curiosity. Perhaps this is exactly the music Shiomi speaks of.

On one hand this piece is certainly a duet for two players: I did always feel that Ellen and I were on a journey together, and I always had the feeling that I was opening up towards her, and indeed her subtle changes would continually affect my experiences. On the other hand, this piece is like a meditation, which insists on the situated experience of a single person. Rather than an arena for subterranean communication through eye contact and energy, I experienced the piece more as a dialogue with myself. We stand in front of each other like a mirror for reflection: I look into the eyes of Ellen but I only see myself. If I'm lucky I might catch a glimpse of Ellen, something I haven't seen before (is this what I wanted all along?), but then I am left with my own thoughts and physical experience of the world. I ponder her, but in pondering her I reveal my own fears and desires. Did I want to feel more connected to Ellen? To emphasize a hypothesis of interconnectedness? Maybe. I can't say that I experienced it like this though. It was much more like an experience of exposure: a wish to be seen, a wish to see, finally.

A few days later Ellen and I met to rehearse a new piece by Henrik Hellstenius with vocal sextet. I almost couldn't look at her.

Jennifer Torrence
December 2020

Blind Touch

Koral (Etude III) (2014) by Jeppe Ernst is a work for two performers employing only facial muscles. The work is scored with conventional musical notation, with each facial movement notated as whole notes and half notes in the time signature of 4/4. It is a sonically silent piece of music, but each physical gesture is marked with a specific intensity using the logic of musical dynamics (pianos and fortes). From the perspective of performance, the most challenging and wonderful aspect of the piece is the sightless communication between the two performers. As the score indicates, the performers hold hands in order to give cues and to remain coordinated during the musical passages.

In some ways this work behaves as an opposite to Shiomi's *music for two players I.* In Ernst's work, the performers remain in physical contact for the duration of the piece, but remain sightless to each other throughout. Where in Shiomi any and all communication occurs through the eyes, in Ernst a blind touching of hands becomes the main channel for communication. Where Shiomi's score provides only a broad structural form, Ernst's score employs traditional musical structures and notation, with rhythms and durations forming recurring motifs and phrases. Where in Shiomi Ellen and I pondered what the performance might read like for an audience (Does the audience sense all of the tension that we are experiencing?), in the Ernst it is *only* the audience who can see how the performance actually unfolds. For in the Ernst, the two performers spend most of the piece with their eyes closed, only briefly flashing their eyes open at the end of each phrase (which I experienced as a gentle reminder that the audience is still there, and as a rather violent intrusion of light [another kind of blinding]). But in many ways the two pieces provide similar areas of discovery for the performer: awareness of the other through physical and energetic forces, vulnerability in communication, trust, and the sharing of a seemingly closed and silent space.

The performance in the video to the left was from a show in January 2020, just months before the world shut down due to COVID-19. It was the last time I touched another person during a performance. Simon Løffler and I performed the work at the KM28 Worst Behaviour series in Berlin. It was our very first performance of the piece. I could feel that we were both nervous. When I felt Simon's hand in mine I could feel that we were both sweating, that he was clutching just that much tighter (Don't let go, don't forget to give me the cues). There was a sense of anxiety that I interpreted as a lack of trust. (How could all of that be picked up in the hands? I can't explain it, but it simply is like this. There was so much information in his touch, and in his presence next to me). The lack of sight is truly disorienting. Even with the physical communication between the two performers, there is still the chance for miscommunication (Was that squeeze of my hand signaling beat 1 or beat 2?). I knew that neither of us could tell in our state of blindness and nervousness if the piece was going well. Certain micro timings of the facial movements were slightly different than in rehearsal, which is always the case in performance, but with the added demand of performing from memory on top of our blindness there was a certain sense that everything could collapse at any moment. The demand to trust one another was challenging. At times it felt impossible. There was a sense that one of us should take control, to be more demonstrative and keep us afloat. The feeling of fragility and co-dependence was profound. Even more impactful was the intimacy I felt with Simon as I understood his vulnerability, his

nerves, his anxiety, his wish to do well, and my mutual vulnerability that most certainly would have been radiating back to him through our clutching hands.

In retrospect, I believe Simon and I might have benefitted from rehearsing in a different way. Our approach to rehearsal was essentially 'drilling it' so that we could be as precise as possible. We worked with a video camera to locate deficiencies, and to repeat the piece until we felt that elusive sense of confidence that performers crave. But no amount of drilling would ever help us when nerves and the unruliness of the live situation would come upon us. We might have benefitted from rehearsal strategies that would increase our bodily listening, for example by using certain theatre exercises, or changing roles regularly in regards to who gives the cues through their hands, or experimenting with giving no cues at all and just *feeling* and *sensing* the momentum of the piece and our musical impulses (an intensity of communication that echos the aforementioned duo by Shiomi.) These kinds of strategies, in combination with the precision approach, might yield the set of skills we actually need to perform this piece well: on the one hand, the ability to execute the movements and timings with clarity and uniformity, and on the other hand, the ability to be mutually vulnerable and to sense and respond to each other—to have a certain "response-ability", as Donna Haraway puts it (2016)—during the deliciously unruly and unpredictable performance situation.[2]

[2] I would even go so far as to say that *any* musical work would benefit from rehearsal processes that combine such skills and awarenesses. In this way the concert can become more than a place to “test” the performer’s ability to reproduce what was decided in the practice room. When the performers are willing and able to respond to the present of the live situation, the concert becomes a place where unique and irreproducible phenomena might occur—and not *in spite* of the stress of performance pressure but *thanks to it*.

Excerpts from a reflection by Jennifer Torrence after the world premiere of Soundtouch in Warsaw, Poland (August, 2017). The full text is available here.

"[From a performance perspective, the most important aspect of *Soundtouch* was] being so close to so many different kinds of audience bodies. There were female and male bodies, trans bodies and cis bodies, skinny and fat, young and old. They were often bodies I had never had the chance to be so close to before. The first task in contact with the audience is to touch their hand in the process of offering them a simple percussion rattle. Across the days I began to understand what kind of quality of touch is required to communicate to a blindfolded stranger what I need them to do. I need them to take this percussion instrument and make sound with it, however they feel is correct. I can show them with my own playing, but they are also free to explore. As soon as I approached a person I could feel their energy, their position with or against the situation they had found themselves in. Their openness or resistance was felt immediately. I can't say for sure if it is the energy of the person, something on their face, something unspoken, but immediately I could understand if this person would need some extra care, or if this person was open and ready to undergo whatever I would throw at them.

The first touch is critical. I found there was a way of touching the hand, arm, and wrist, in the first gesture of giving the sounding objects away that is both firm in the sense that it communicates that the person touching them has control, but also soft in the sense that the person touching them is not dangerous. It has something to do with the surface area covered by my hand, and it has something to do with pacing. But it also has to do with listening through the body, adjusting to the spectator when they show their needs and desires, but always offering my own leadership that shows they are safe.

The most unique body for me to be close to was an old man. I never had a close relationship with any elderly men. My grandfathers had passed away before I was old enough to think about their body in such a way, to think about the physicality of aging. To smell an older man, to see the hair growing in their ears, to take the same care with them as a body I feel more used to being close to. This was a wonderfully bizarre and life-giving experience.

There is a section where I lay boards across the hips of the participants and a Chinese cymbal rests on their sternum. I found out quickly that not all bodies can have a cymbal on their chest, and indeed not all bodies have hips that easily balance a board. It wasn't that we hadn't considered this fact, but it was another thing to be in a situation with body after new body and quickly having to improvise the best possible way to provide this experience of having an instrument resonating through their bones, while still fitting the individuality of each body...

… After the piece was over, I would allow the audience to lay in silence on their mats. Every group reacted so differently. Every group came in as four individuals, but a group culture was consistently created almost instantaneously from the moment the piece began. Occasionally this culture would transform through the situation of a collective experience, an understanding that as four individuals they had become a group that underwent a unique

experience, one that would be difficult to share with the outside world. In these groups, their desire to lay on the mats in silence together was almost palpable. There was occasionally the feeling that no one wanted to get up for fear of breaking the precious silence that they had finally been afforded. Occasionally one or two people would continue to play, touching the instruments around their heads, or making sounds of their own invention.

Once they arose there was every reaction from wonder, to continued fear of the unknown, to an overwhelmed feeling that can only come from total surrender to a situation, and of course, there were the ones still busy “figuring it out”. It was their reactions, and my privilege in witnessing their person, their energy, sometimes in transformation, and sometimes in simple being, that was the most important and giving aspect of this piece. It was something I could never grow exhausted from.

This piece is about listening through the body. Literally listening to the vibrations of sound, but also listening through touch, by being near another person. It is about giving up control and being willing to adjust to the spectator when they show their needs and desires. But it is also about the generosity of leading the piece and showing that each person is safe and that they are seen. It’s about empathy. And I had never experienced this so strongly in performance before" (Torrence, 2019).

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