

Fiery, Luminous, Scary

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A call for a participatory art event often entails the invitation to touch. This may involve an actual direct touching ("touch this lever, this button and it will cause a change in the environment"), or it may involve a more elusive call to touch that includes being moved by a work in transformation. Either way, the call to touch is a demand: it asks the participant to relate, in this time of interaction, to the unfolding of the work. It asks the participant to be open to a certain unknowability, and to a certain risk.

Here I want to suggest that despite calls made toward open-endedness and process (understood as positive effects of a generative event) the call to touch is never straightforward. For it is a call, and like all calls it asks that it be listened to in certain ways, that it elicit behaviour considered manageable under the conditions of the work. This is the risk any artist takes: that the call to touch will expose itself as an all-or-nothing proposition, that the participant will feel burdened by the event rather than excited by it, that instead of setting new conditions for experimentation, a failure will be experienced from the outset, a failure to have known in advance what it means to touch.

This is because a call to touch is always bounded to some extent within certain predefined expectations: touch depends on a certain preunderstanding of what are considered its acceptable limits. *Touch, but touch this way!* No matter how carefully crafted, no participatory art event is ever completely exempt from this imbrication of touch with the expectations that accompany it. For touch, as Jacques Derrida has shown, can never be completely disentwined from tact.¹ This strange intertwining of touch with tact, of touch's inherent injunction to be "hands-on" and its elusive demand to know in advance what participation means in each instance, is the complex challenge of any art that asks the spectator to be involved in the carrying-through of the work. I have elsewhere called this dynamic a "politics of touch,"² emphasizing that within the realm of touch lies both tact-driven behaviour that constrains to pre-ordained notions of participation, and the opportunity to rearticulate the political toward a gesture of a reaching-toward. With participatory art, a politics of touch is always at stake—a politics that trembles between touch-as-tact and touch as the activity through which new constellations for the body are created (and where the line between body and environment is blurred).

The role participatory art plays in activating and rethinking a politics of touch was made particularly apparent to me in July 2010 when 18-year-old DJ Savarese and I began a collaborative project involving my artwork, *Folds to Infinity* (Erin Manning, 2005-2012). DJ is autistic, and our plan was to generate ideas for how to bring participatory art to the autistic community: we had been invited by AUTCOM,³ a conference organized by and for autists, to create an installation of the work.

In a project such as *Folds to Infinity*, participation means many things: to walk among the fabrics and enjoy their texture, to touch or wear the fabric, to reposition it or compose with it architecturally, to assist another who is trying to compose clothing but can't quite manage on her own, to be inadvertently connected to the magnets interspersed in the collection (your belt-buckle may inadvertently pull the fabric off someone else's body or shift the shape of the installation). The invitation is broad: to touch, to move, to be moved.⁴

But as was made clear when DJ first entered the installation space, participation with the work also means understanding the limits of touch in the singular context of each of the piece's iterations. This, I believe, is what initially held DJ back in the context of our collaborative work at the SenseLab. For even before he had extended his hand to the mobile architecture that held *Folds to Infinity*, even before he had begun to engage with the work, he heard the injunction: *get it right!* DJ quickly retracted his hand and moved across the participatory environment to sit on an orange couch and wait for further instructions. The initial promise of intuitive co-composition had passed, and been replaced by a distancing posture of reflection. Not in the least surprising: no one wants to play when it seems as though the rules of the game are laid out in advance.

Relational art's call to touch, to play, to encounter an environment in its unfolding, risks failure if its politics of touch are not immanent to the event. Any expectation of touch will always risk including a predetermined understanding of what it means to engage the work. Such a notion of touch will never be able to completely divest itself of its doubling of *touch!* with *do not touch!* or *touch this way!*

The challenge is immense: a participatory work that is successful cannot depend on the mantra of "anything goes" as this will only produce (in the best of all cases) chaos or (in the worst case scenario) nothing. For a work to be successful, enabling constraints must be embedded within its conceptual design, and these constraints must to some degree direct the work toward its unfolding. But these constraints must also remain flexible enough to refrain from the preposturing of the work (*touch it, but get it right!*). To do its work, participatory art must reflect on how it creates the constellations for its unfolding, how it places within the work

the expectations that may ultimately close down the very potential the work was meant to unleash.

This was not all immediately clear to me. What I knew at the outset was that DJ had sensed an expectation that I had inadvertently built into the event, despite the thought I had given to how the conditions of a participatory event are crafted. And so it became our job, our collective effort for the next three days (and the months to follow), to better understand how touch came to embody the injunction I wanted to leave behind. Our task: to conceive of a way of re-entering the field of participation such that the politics of touch are no longer confined to the realm of tactful touch, but are instead inflected toward the relational ecology a singular iteration of the piece calls forth.

The first question was how the artwork itself crafts the problem: what is the artwork's call? Does the fabric, the installation, the magnetic architecture, depend on the laying of hands? And if so, does it ask for a certain kind of touch? Does the fabric necessitate a physical handling, a local encounter with this or that kind of visible or tangible interactivity? Or might there be within the piece an opening for the creation of participatory techniques that turn toward more than a local response?⁵

Folds to Infinity is not a neutral materiality that is added onto the performative. The fabric, the magnets, the architecture—each of these activates orientations that affect how the piece itself activates spacetimes of experience. This means that the work must be seen not as an object but as an event (a choreographic object): it is always and only what it does, here, now. This also means that each iteration of the work will reorient what the work can do. Nothing can be taken for granted. Participatory art cannot follow a template: every participant will affect how the work unfolds, and each unfolding of the work will affect how the work evolves for the next iteration. No matter how many times a piece has been exhibited, no matter how successful it has been in this or that context, no matter how many evolving techniques have been woven into the work to facilitate its structured improvisation, there is no guarantee that the conditions of this particular enunciation will unfold the piece in predictable (or interesting) ways. There is simply no guarantee with work that depends on participation for its unfolding.

Day 1

DJ increasingly found himself in a fix. He wanted to play, wanted to see touch as the invitation to play, but understandably felt that play was tinted with expectations not yet fully worked out. What if in the playing, tactlessness reared its head, re-stereotyping him? For DJ is visibly autistic and has had enough of being accused of untactful behaviour—too loud,

too disruptive, too excited, too alive. He has been taught over and over by a largely uncomprehending neurotypical world to not touch-engage-relate with such verve, so directly. Here, in the context of *Folds to Infinity*, he risks once more being “too much” or, even worse, being “taken as stupid,” as he calls it. For while there is no question that DJ is highly intelligent, a scenario whose stakes are muddy risks putting him in a position in which he is incapable of properly working out the conditions of the environment and rising to the occasion, thus reinvigorating the deep anxiety he lives with, and making his motor-activation issues more acute.

On top of this, it is already hard enough for DJ to try to mask the complexity of sensation he lives with every second of the day without having to spontaneously learn what we neurotypicals might have in mind when we select out one sense (touch) and incite him to follow our lead. What can this even mean to someone for whom the concept of discrete sense modalities remains a mystery? For DJ’s experience of the world, like many autists, involves a complex synaesthesia where it is unclear how discrete modalities on their own do the work of sensing. What can touch mean to those for whom to sense is to participate in a cross-modal orientation toward the world, where to smell means to hear colour, where to see means to taste sound? Intense synaesthesia creates an agitation of perception complicating the parsing out of experience into this or that—this touch or that fabric—undermining the easy separation of human-actor and object-receptor. For the autist, to be in the world is to world, to experience the unfolding, in all of its complexity, of the co-mingling of all drops of experience.

Day 2

Sometimes composing on his iPad, sometimes exploring the field of forces of the rare earth magnets of which the collection and the architecture are composed, sometimes quietly attending to the environment from the half-distance of his seat on the couch, DJ participates in a dance of attention that is never disinterested. For it is clear, as we communicate through the iPad’s synthesized voice, that DJ does want to actively compose with the installation, and that he feels drawn to it: “I want Erin to help me create play,” he types. The question is how to bridge that first injunction of tact-touch, how to invite DJ to reach beyond this first injunction toward a new constellation that precisely does *not* seek to prefigure in advance how the relational field should express itself? How might we open the work to the differential created in the act of reaching-toward, a reaching-toward through which a relationality could be crafted that would exceed the sum of the event’s parts?

On the second day, it occurs to me to ask DJ to tell me about his experience of the space. Was an environment of my creation also an opening to him? Did he think *Folds to Infinity's* mobile architecture as I had conceived it would be a generative proposition for other autists? DJ suggested that the installation may not cater to all kinds of movement, and that it may in fact not foreground movement enough. We followed through with this proposition, discussing the possibility of bringing the work to AUTCOM in the form of a mobile experiment that would use participants' wheelchairs themselves as metallic architectures. Although we did not ultimately follow through with this, it became the first clue: perhaps to "create" play was to allow the artwork to travel on its own? To make movement its subject and as well as its outcome?

Day 3

DJ Savarese writes: "Experts think they can determine our thoughts from observing our behaviour, but most of you know this is hard to do for anyone. It is especially hard to do if the person's body deserts its hopeful mind because of severe anxiety or illogical sensory input. For example, some of us see emotions as colours and others of us feel noise. We might stop a movement. People think we're avoiding doing work, but we're deserting our reasonable selves because we feel a fearful sound or see quiet green reassessed as approval."⁶

"Quiet green reassessed as approval" began to tint this third day already suffused with explorations into participation-as-mobility, participation as an opening to a mobile unfolding of event-time. With the beginnings of this constellation mapped out, in a rare bid for "independence," a concept that means much to those who have daily needs that must be met by others, DJ typed for his parents to leave the room so that he could finally "create play with Erin."

What is the difference between playing and creating play? To be forced to play is like being forced to touch. Not only does it potentially do violence to the complex relational field in co-composition, it also presupposes an already-homogenized arena of engagement. This tends to put it squarely in the realm of a local interaction instead of within a field of relation where what is foregrounded is not the human per se but the *more-than* of experience in the unfolding. Was there enough nuance within the artwork's proposition, I wondered, to activate relation beyond the linear model of a localized interactivity?

Folds to Infinity was initially conceived as an intervention into prêt-à-porter culture. My initial question was what might it mean for a body to express itself as a continuum in the dressing rather than to have to pre-fit the clothing? While conventions of haute couture *were* based on

the creation of the garment for the body in its present form (without an ideal of shape or size pre-inscribed), haute couture was never democratically available for the populace at large. Would it be possible to reinscribe certain aspects of haute couture—the singularity of creation for just this shape, just this movement of the body-becoming—while still making the garment available to all, as it was meant to be in the prêt-à-porter tradition with which we are more familiar? Adjacent to these concerns was the exploration of what it might mean to dress relationally. The force of the magnets—and the disquiet they cause in the dressing, creating sporadic folds and spontaneously connecting to pieces in their proximity—would make it very difficult to compose alone, thus proposing an opening for a collective practice of dressing.

I knew, of course, that this was only one proposition of what the work could do as a choreographic object. Nonetheless, spending time with DJ in the SenseLab, I realized that my research questions were still too prominent, creating too tight a constraint within what I wanted to see as an exploratory matrix. With DJ it became clear that I had to actively **open up the work to its own more-than**, to engage with what it could do without necessarily assuming that it was only doing its work when it was directly, locally handled.

Already tending toward these kinds of considerations, in 2009 I began a collaboration with Mazi Javidiani and Ronald Simon to explore, through conductive fabric, animated video, proximity sensors, and miniature fans, how *Folds to Infinity* might begin to “entertain the environment” beyond the kind of participatory call sewn already into its concept. The idea behind this phase of *Folds to Infinity* (entitled *Weather Patterns*) is to set up a system of sensors embedded into the fabric that react to movement, altering the threshold conditions of light in the environment while activating barely perceptible air currents. For this to happen, the participants need not actually touch the work—any shift in the electromagnetic conditions of the room will have an effect, as will any movement, including that of air currents. The idea behind this version of *Folds to Infinity* is to make felt how the simple presence of movement in the space affects the environmental conditions not only of the space itself, but also of the work. Since the focus of *Weather Patterns* is on thresholds of perception, these changes in environmental conditions will not physically alter the space in any radically apparent way, but will give the sense that the space is in movement. The artwork will thus entertain the environment *with* and, in some sense, *despite* the participant, making the participant part of the active ecology of the world tuning to its difference without necessarily putting the participant in the role of direct activator of change. There will of course remain the option to compose with the fabric, to build, to dress, to architect. But the proposition remains more open in this piece.

Although this phase of the project was not yet resolved during DJ's visit to be SenseLab, it felt as though the potential of this notion of entertainment as related to the environmentality of ecologies in the making was exactly what DJ and I were working toward.

Entertaining the Environment

It took three days, but finally it occurred to me to ask DJ what it was he saw exactly, in this field of experimentation. "Quiet green in a sea of noise" was his answer. "What shall we do to quieten the environment?" I asked him, realizing that the field of colour was too much, too loud, too overwhelming to really engage with. We immediately took down the black, which DJ classified as "scary," perhaps because of the colour, or perhaps simply because of the injunction (*Touch! Do not touch!*) it had come to embody—for it was the black fabric of *Volumetrics* that incited DJ to pull back in his initial encounter with *Folds to Infinity* upon entering the SenseLab the first time.

What became clear during this process of scaling back on colour was that, for DJ, a colour does not evoke a quality; it is a qualitative field in itself. He hears the qualitative resonance of colour's relational field in its emergence: he feels "fiery" for orange, he directly experiences "luminous" when he "sees" the dupioni silks, themselves in varying shades of blue, purple and pink.

This direct experience of quality is allied to synaesthesia, and particularly to what Daniel Stern calls the event's "activation contour"—the force of form of an event's coming into itself. As it became more apparent that DJ and I were dealing with the affective force of activation contours—instead of discrete objects or even colours—we finally began to see how we might actively create play. **To create play was to play with and generate new activation contours.**

To touch will always of course also mean to handle, to reach across toward the texture of the world in all of its complexity, but its attendant affective quality—to be touched, **to touch in the between of words**—is ultimately how activation contours are tweaked. From DJ—as from many other autists—what we can learn is that touch is a worlding that always already participates in making sense of the world. No laying of hands is necessary for this: to touch is to become attuned to the ecologies of sensation always already activating the world as we embody it, as it embodies us.

In the end, DJ and I did create play. And we did directly touch the fabric. But this touching felt like an afterthought. For in our creation of a new mobile architecture, what we were doing was less handling the fabrics than activating the architecture of light that was always already part of the installation. In a sense, what we were doing was parsing out

the luminousness from the wider field of movement-moving and overcrowding sensations.

To create play is not as simple as to touch. Perhaps for the neurotypical, touch is the most immediate entry into the relational that we can conceive of. But **all participatory work, to be successful, must get beyond this first injunction.** The work must carry within its concept the conditions for play that can propel the participant toward **the more-than** of touch, where the activity of the work in its eventness can be felt, where the work's already attuning relational potential affects what a body-worlding can do. Seen this way, there is no work that isn't already potentially participatory, be it a painting, architecture, an installation, a musical composition. The challenge is to create the conditions for the piece to work in an ecology of relation that does not privilege the interactive, but seeks to open the way for the activation of the *more-than* that the work has to offer.

What neurodiversity teaches us, it seems to me, are techniques to become attuned to this *more-than*, to become-attuned to the ineffable amodality of experience that activates the contours of the event toward a moving, an encountering, a being-moved in a complex ecology of practices.

Spacetimes of relation are never neutral. They are fiery, luminous, scary. They are alive across their resonances, human and non-human, modal and amodal. They are attendant and attending, attuning and entertaining. With DJ at the SenseLab, over time we began to collectively attune to how the work did its work, alone and in recombination. We found that even without laying hands on the work, the work was never passive, never still. It was lived in a synesthetic interplay that was mobile and complex, propositional across registers. And we found that it was here, in an approach more ecological than interactive, in a veering from implicit demand, from implicit expectation, that the work began to create play.

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Notes

1. See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching- Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. (Stanford UP, 2005).
2. See Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2007).
3. The topic of the 2010 AUTCOM conference was "Communication, Competence, Community: Nothing About Us Without Us."
4. See more about *Folds to Infinity* under "Events" on my website: www.erinmovement.com.
5. I discuss this challenge at length in an earlier piece entitled "Dancing the Technogenetic Body" in *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (MIT Press, 2009). Here I suggest that "local" interactivity is most often deadening to the processual aspect of the work because it creates a posture of cause and effect in the spectator that tends not to lead to a more complex interrelation with the work's potential above and beyond the effective constraint of the limits of the interactive set-up.
6. In Ralph Savarese, *Reasonable People, A Memoir of Autism and Adoption* (Other Press, 2007).

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