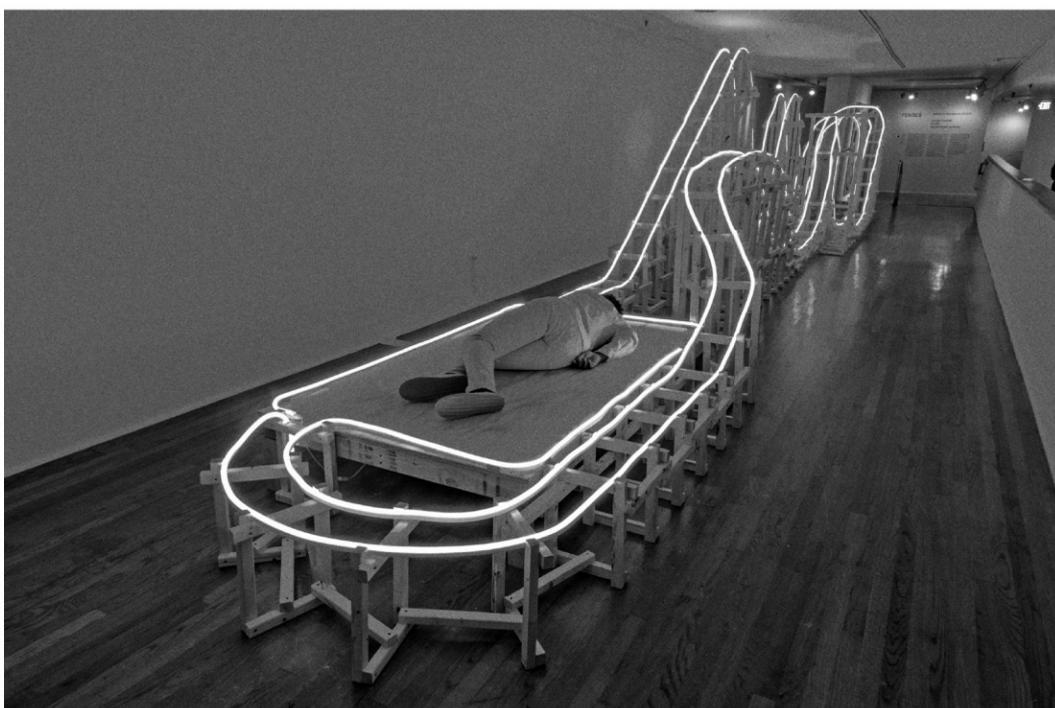


Unfamiliar Intimacies:



taisha paggett and Meena Murugesan perform "counts orchestrate, a meadow (or weekly practice with breath)", March 4 & 5, 2017, as part of *Endless Shout* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. (Photos: Ryan Collerd)

On taisha paggett, EJ Hill,



A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy, EJ Hill. (Photo: Adam Reich)

and Wordless Touching

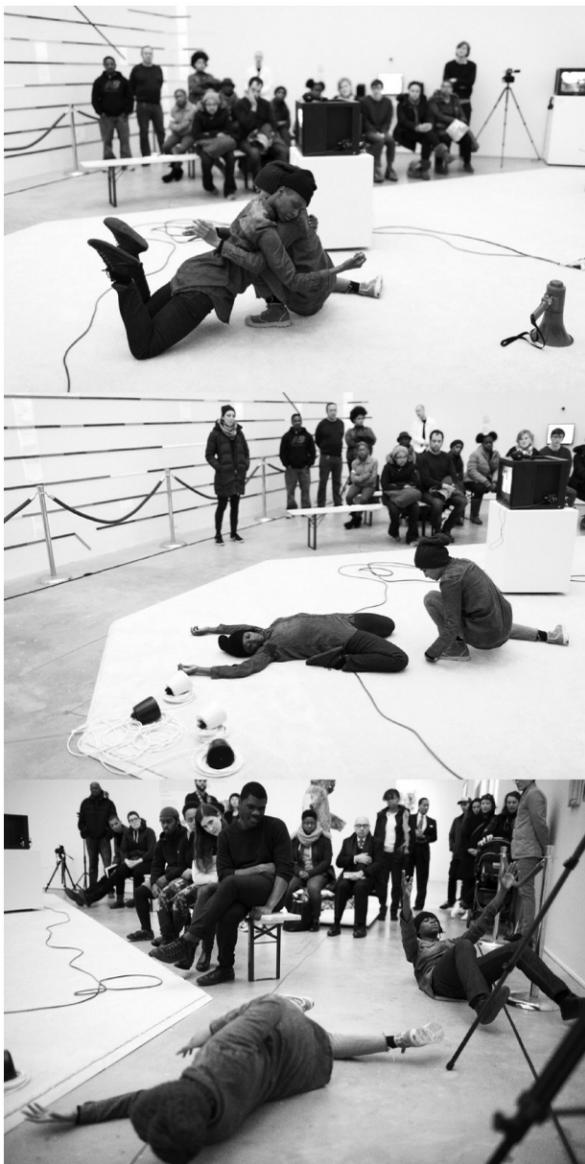
by WILMER WILSON

During the first three weeks of April 2017, videos of multiple incidents of nonconsensual contact between airline staff and flight passengers made national headlines. On April 9th, an overbooked United Airlines flight spurred airport security to forcefully drag a man off of the plane after he refused to volunteer his trip to staff; and on April 21st a woman traveling with a baby on American Airlines was allegedly struck with her stroller by airline attendants, leading to a tense confrontation between the culprit and other travelers. The interactions as visualized play out in a strangely familiar language. All around us this type of nonconsensual touching proliferates *ad infinitum*: in the mundane corners of everyday life, in the most mythical foundations of our cultural imaginary, and everywhere in between. Airport security procedures, action movies, and the TV show *Cops* have prepped me to anticipate how such authority figures employ touch when encountering perceived resistance.

Yet my fluency in the touching of these videos makes seeing them no less agitating, because I understand these victims to be doing nothing wrong. Visualizing contentious moments of touch will always be important because it lets us as a public reassess normative protocols for acceptable and unacceptable types of exchange between bodies. In a social landscape where invasive gestures continue to proliferate onto the bodies of marginalized people, revealing the interplay of social contracts by framing interactions is crucial for addressing systematized violence. What types of consent and nonconsent remain illegible to those forces threatening to touch whatever, whenever, and however they please? And why?

Consent is such a fundamental material issue in social and political life that it seems to identify itself in explicit terms: verbally with “yes” or “no,” or in written forms like signing a name on a contract. It was jarring then to experience the indeterminate public touching happening in taisha paggett’s *counts orchestrate, a meadow* (or *weekly practice with breath*) at the ICA Philadelphia. paggett and her collaborator Meena Murugesan presented the project as a series of rehearsals that unfolded over several intervals during a weekend in March. Audience members sat on benches which were rearranged before each cycle; some lined the outer walls while others punctuated the implied stage of the center of the room. The two performers entered the space amidst a soundtrack of recorded breaths, humming, and tapped or vocalized rhythms. Bodies low to the ground, they threaded into one another and apart again, around the architecture and objects of the room, around the benches and the people sitting on them. They convulsed into one another, spasmed and stuttered and held one another, until it became unclear how or why

Photos: Ryan Collerd



their strenuous labor and bodily intimacy should be distinguished. The room effervesced with vocalizations of their work – grunts, sighs, countings – multiplied by the recorded breaths of the soundtrack. With its past and present merging, the piece gestured toward a queer future of intertwining labor and intimacy.

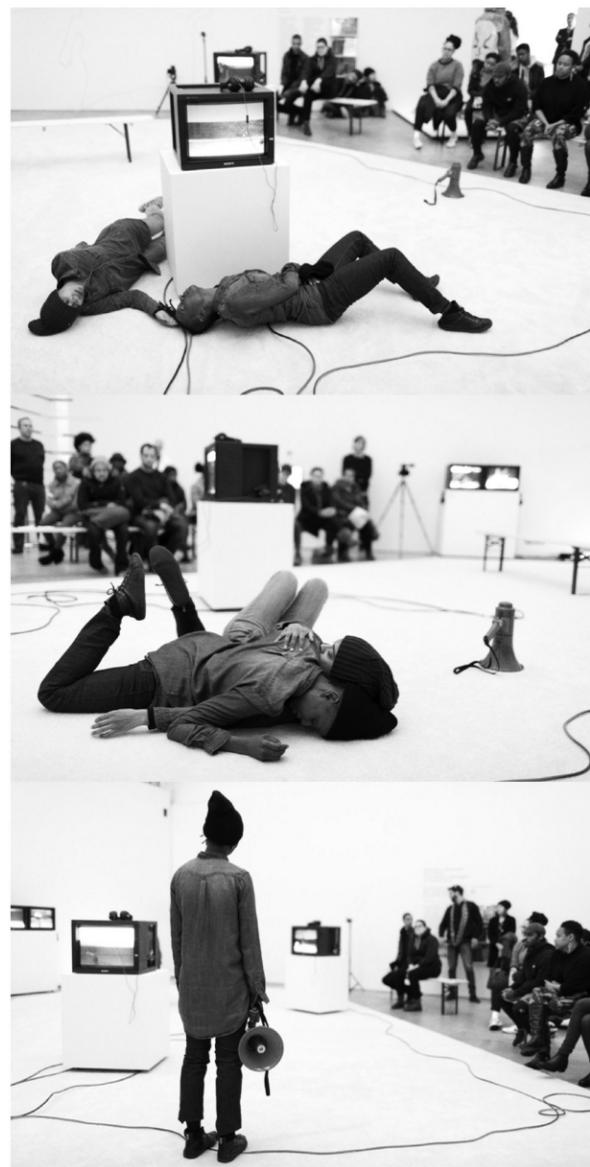
In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord talks about the necessity for spectacular capitalist systems to separate their workers’ experiences of labor and leisure. I would argue that the labor of interpersonal intimacy is useful within such a system solely for its ability to convert interlocutors into consumers, as opposed to intimacy as an end result. Thus intimacy is not seen as a productive type of labor, and gets relegated to the realm of leisure. The performance challenged that separation, not just when the performers engaged in this negotiation between themselves, but in the moments when they negotiated touch with members of the audience as well. paggett crawled over to a woman sitting on a bench and began wordlessly grabbing her arm. Everyone in the vicinity tensed up when they realized the performance bore the possibility of involving bodily requests or demands of them. The woman who was grabbed grabbed back. It was hard to discern who initiated what qualities of their developing improvisation, who ratcheted up the tension of their holds on one another, but before long paggett was placing her full weight onto this woman to do a glacially steady back bend onto the ground. Their two bodies began shaking at the limbs, collateral from the muscle tension of holding and being held. Arm still latched onto the viewer’s, eyes locked into hers, paggett used the free parts of her body to gesture intimately around the seat and leg of the bench, as if it were an extension of her laboring partner. Engaging the support of their embrace again, paggett slowly lifted her body from the ground. Finally the two released each other. The performance continued.

The mere incorporation of a living body into a composition makes consent an animating issue in performance. On one end of the spectrum are performers actively transgressing accepted notions of consent to challenge the demands of decorum, often at the expense of any particular bystander. Ann Liv Young has little hesitation in extracting engagement from audience or crew members who choose to remain present through her works. In her best moments Young takes advantage of her authority as artist to jolt audience members out of their socialized passivity as such. Yet this same authority also normalizes Young’s predilection for overwhelming viewers into compliance, often with disregard for closed body language, reluctance-tinged replies, and other variously communicated signals of nonconsent.

Touch also reveals itself to be fraught by artists who use their own body as a central fulcrum of the work, thus fashioning themselves as both the subject and object of art. In *Embodied Avatars*, Uri McMillan describes this subject-object position as an “avatar” or a “simulated being.” The avatar is a mechanism for examining how a being can come to be treated as an object, by whom, and why. And becoming an object is not easy. Several artists working in this vein (I consider myself one) have spoken publicly about discreet moments during performances when they felt their subjectivity ruptured by an unexpected nonconsensual touch. At the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2016, EJ Hill performed a work titled *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy*. The artist lies atop the platform portion of a sculpture resembling a wooden roller-coaster for the duration of exhibition hours. But the usual art institution apparatuses were not enough to prevent viewers from feeling entitled to disregard their non-existent personal history with the artist – as well as his unresponsive demeanor, lack of eye contact, and lack of speech – and touch his body. In late August 2016, Hill was prompted to post on Instagram after two visitors nonconsensually touched him during the piece. In the post he says:

...if you plan to view this work in person, please consider that while yes, this is a work of art, one of its primary materials is a living body. A body attached to feelings, fears, and cultural traumas; to personal histories and goals; a body with agency and affection; a body that experiences ups, downs, twists and turns just as the rest; a body that is not solely presented for your benefit or consumption. A body trying, against all odds, to live.

Verbally affirmative modes of consent serve a vital function in making violence enacted upon bodies legally punishable; that violence disproportionately falls along raced and gendered lines. But as Aliza Shvarts notes in “Non-Consensual Collaborations, 2012-present,” the “rarefied court-bound sphere” of legal action is narrower in scope than that of lived social relations; in addition, “the subject able to give consent, to exercise will, and to demonstrate injury before the law is neither timeless nor universal, but materially and historically produced.” An offering of black queer visibility in many ways, Hill’s lack of speech during the performance also makes clear the myriad ways in which institutional forms of legibility, including verbal and legal frameworks, have failed blackness and queerness systemically. It was an egregious perpetuation of this failure for the visitors to



Photos: Ryan Collerd

proliferate more of the same invasive touching of black and queer bodies that happens in daily life. After the incident the Studio Museum placed a placard near the work’s didactics that stated “Please do not touch the artist.”

The wordless vocalizing of paggett’s *counts orchestrate* functions similarly. It exploits the failure of formal language to hold labor and intimacy in close proximity to one another. But whereas Hill used his avatar-like performing body to draw out a dispersed social fabric not always physically there with him, paggett directly challenges the sociality of bodies that are present together in one space. If blackness, as suggested by Fred Moten in his quoting of Édouard Glissant in “Blackness and Nothingness,” has its point of genesis in bodies being sent to “consent not to be a single being,” then a project aiming to hold open a space for blackness must find a way to embed itself within a social fabric. In attempting to sustain a live communal space (a meadow) for black queer intimacy and labor, paggett’s work places trust not in the objectifying institutional frameworks pervading the everyday, but in the indeterminacy of improvisation instead. paggett proffers these social moments of negotiation in order to forge new modes of intimacy, and does so with the labor of such an endeavor in full view. *counts orchestrate* allowed performer and audience member, two black women, to wordlessly, methodically, and publicly negotiate the terms of their dissolution into one another and back again.

Sometimes it is hard to imagine the ways paggett’s unfamiliar intimacies could be employed against the relentless violence of everyday social interaction. Within my own everyday experience, I feel wary of treading into unfamiliar territories of consent with strangers and friends alike. It is effortless to reprise countless nonconsensual violations against people who have historically been violated disproportionately. There is much labor to be done to address systemic failings and lay the groundwork for expansive modes of social negotiation.

In the meantime, we must find the meadows where we can rehearse, or make them. We must rehearse our unlearning of socialized separation, interrogate it all, and put it back together again as something dynamic and responsive. And we must approach it actively, firmly, and tenuously, but not aggressively, as I originally mistook paggett’s touching action to be.

Even without the guarantee of a finalized recital, let us keep rehearsing, by ourselves and with a few others we can find, until strange forms move between us effortlessly.

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