

Monika Jaeckel, Berlin, Germany: *Text for a talk /movement performance*

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- presented together with:

Jack Britton - performance maker and traceur (parkour practitioner) <http://jackagbritton.tumblr.com/>

Katherine Hall – interdisciplinary dance artist <https://www.facebook.com/KatherineHallDanceArtis>

Lewys Holt - freelance Dance Artist www.facebook.com/lewysholtdance

The Touching Moment: touching matter – matter of response

*“Touch moves and affects what it effects.”*¹ is how Karen Barad, professor for Feminist Studies, Philosophy, and History of Consciousness in Santa Cruz, California, summarizes her conclusion that the aspects of *touching upon* something or *being touched* affect movement. This conditional relation of touch also influences the way orientation is formed². It may seem as subtle as just to effect breathing, or as direct as to bump into something. Eventually, the entire sense of being is affected, and with it the lines of movement, which define the ways of our knowledge of and in this world.

Response is thus essential to touch. Imagine the pre-verbal infant, who just crawls and explores their surroundings by climbing, touching, and eventually even trying to bite or chew on things. In this state the infant quite literally takes the *effects of touch as affective impulses* of world making. The emerging effect of touch sways knowledge through the experience of contact. Limits may deviate from a presumed form or line, influencing thus movement per se or a movement of thought which was expected to continue unimpeded.

¹ Barad, Karen. “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am”, in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 2012, p.208

² Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 2006; see also her blogposts from 2014

This *response-ability* of and towards others, and matter in general, *constitutes each of 'us'*, is how Barad describes the interdependence of mattering and matter in general, which is enacted in the process of an encounter. Defining matter and us in this sense of world making and (world) becoming in a specific moment of interaction incites mattering as meaning. Based on her background as a physicist, Barad's interest for quantum mechanics led her to specify interaction, through the neologism of intra-action. Her purpose but is not to simply transpose quantum mechanics insights analogically onto the macro world, but to attempt an epistemological and ontological approach to certain *phenomena*. The moment of a touching contact could be seen as such an intra-action, as a 'cutting-together-apart'³ which is a defining moment of difference.

Announce: - interactive sequence -

Touch can be understood as the defining moment that creates contact and exchange. It is a chiasmic entanglement of attractive-repulsive responses⁴ (of contact) establishing a certain structure of *matter(ing)*. This relational constitution is often interpreted as a one-sided self-definition by extending our anthropocentric view onto the world around. An act that is widely understood as to be initiated and rationalized only by 'us', as if others, human or non-human, would not play a necessary and important part⁵ precisely because of their non-predictable response-ability in the situation of mattering to which 'we' relate⁶. Contrary to this self-centric view, matter and 'the others', are not just needed as a relational 'background' that allows measuring and locating a lone (most likely western), human figure. *It is* the vital surrounding that manifests matter/ing based on the mutuality of exchange and that needs such response.

³ Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, 2007, p. 394

⁴ With repulsion at the heart of attraction, electrons deliver a good example here, as Barad expresses it - > Quantum

⁵ While indeed evidence and extent of human activities provoked the term of the Anthropocene to critically address the human influence and to mark to a certain degree the extinct of a culture/nature divide.

⁶ A point that accounts for extinction of certain animals or plants, as well as for the climate change.

The philosopher Alva Noë points out a similar fact that dancers regarding their engagement in respect of the audience enact an environment of possibilities for them. From a different angle but in certain congruence to Barad he states that the environment is *brought forth* by us. Our surrounding *is one whose meaning is always specified relative to us and the situation*⁷.

Even if a performance is staged in a predefined setting (like this one today), the resonance called up by the movement of the dancers, opens a field of potential action⁸ and that is why we *see the environment, when we look at dance*.⁹ Thus while sitting here, you are not only moving through different positions on your chair, but are also ‘moved’ by the movement of others.

Even ‘staying in touch’ over a long distance, either in time or space entails a sort of mutual exchange. As already the manifold meanings of the word (English) ‘touch’ suggest, it does not necessarily need to be a literal way of touching to create contact. ‘*Tap, tap, swipe, tap*’: being in touch, by remotely linking via a digital interface to each other, has become a quite common experience. A literal relation created via technological devices that allow interaction. Today this often implies to touch upon a screen to get in touch with someone else. But the tactile experience of impacting the smooth surface of glass or plastic is almost ignored.

Touching a touchscreen addresses the responsiveness we desire but seems less affecting than being pointed at with a red laser pointer. You might be annoyed by this fleeting spot causing futile grasping but that cannot be caught. Still it is not unimportant what touches on what, as only some materials react in the presumed way to each other.

E.K. Sedgwick remarks in her book ‘*Touching Feeling*’ that texture despite its grounding reference with touch ‘involves more than one sense’ and consequently it has to be considered that ‘the different properties, and radically divergent modern histories, of different

⁷ Noë, Alva. “Making Worlds Available” in *Knowledge in Motion*, transcript Verlag, 2007, p.126

⁸ “is that a body in motion is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own non-present potential to vary.” B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p.4

⁹ Noë, Alva. “Making Worlds Available” in *Knowledge in Motion*, transcript Verlag, 2007, p.126

perceptual systems [...] torque and splay the history of texture as well.’ Albeit she states that the sense of physical touch itself ‘has been remarkably unsusceptible to being amplified by technology.’ (2003)¹⁰ The sensational extension of affect enabled in current technology through its prolonged connectivity¹¹, seems but to mitigate the sensation of touch into routines of a coded performance. In that it counters Barad’s definition that it is essential for the ability to respond not to be a calculation that is performed.¹²

Response-ability as addressed by Barad, entails an incalculability as *touching* does. Even when acted out often and becoming habit, its affective side yields a response. The relation to responsibility makes it a mutual exchange, a performative encounter of constituting. Its affectivity might suddenly lead to an effect of something unprecedented, unexpected. Certainly also your mobile phone can fail to react in the expected way, most likely by becoming annoyingly unresponsive to your gestures.

The interesting twist that habit per se is a trained procedure, but can be intercepted enables Parkour runners to perceive and approach an environment very differently than the average person might do in a daily routine. Adaption to the built habitat is based on the runners’ trained abilities allowing them to react in the instant of a momentarily movement-interaction. In Barad’s words responsibility is an integral relation that does not appear ‘*through the realisation of some existing possibility, but through the iterative reworking of im/possibility, an ongoing rupturing, a cross-cutting of topological reconfigurations*’.¹³

Extending these meanderings onto the proposition of this talk experiment asks to consider also associations and thoughts as embodied. K. Barad states that *thought experiments*

¹⁰ Sedgwick, Eve K. *Touching Feeling*, 2003, p.15

¹¹ especially on the basis of our audible and visual sensing abilities

¹² Barad, Karen. “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am”, in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, p. 217; “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, in *Derrida Today* 3.2, 2010, p. 265: Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness. Not through the realisation of some existing possibility, but through the iterative reworking of im/possibility, an ongoing rupturing, a cross-cutting of topological reconfiguring of the space of responsibility.

¹³ Barad, Karen. “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance”, in *Derrida Today* 3.2, 2010, p.265

are dependent on cognitive processes as they are situated and experienced in forms of intra-action and thus equivalent to *material matter*.¹⁴ The understanding of this underlying movement-interaction brings forth differently layered tendencies of knowing. Theory or verbal dialogues appear now as transpositions familiar with other forms of movement, which constitute just different forms of *mattering* and *matter* (*the one of 'thought'*).

To get in touch is to be in dialogue, which due to the paradigmatic nature of any dialogical exchange is always transitory, as is the touching moment of response. These encounters create a resonance of difference, a cutting-together-apart, of *the self within the other and the other within self*, thus defining one self and the surrounding. Acknowledging the own dependency on the relationality of things demands an ethics that respects the other 'form'. It means to see the environment.

To be open to *response-ability* means to perceive this wall as a Parkour person would, not as confining but standing for a possibility to create an experience of bouncing off of it in an unexpected way. Equally this presentation is informed and shaped by a proposition of motion that accesses both a talk and movement as interdependent dialogical forms. It is an experiment that attempts the fragile appearance and experience of this 'touching moment' as dialogical matter of response-ability in a wider sense.

Finally to end with a quote I accidentally came across in the leaflet of the recent exhibition of the artist Danh Vo here at the Nottingham Contemporary. He states: "To me, things come out of the continuous dialog you have with your surroundings...".

¹⁴ Barad, Karen. "On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am", in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 2012, p.208; see also the research of E. Thelen, 1994