

WHO TOUCHED ME?

FRED MOTEN AND WU TSANG

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INTRODUCTION

FRÉDÉRIQUE BERGHOLTZ AND SUSAN GIBB

We are very pleased to present *Who touched me?*, a publication compiling the research project of Fred Moten and Wu Tsang, which they have undertaken over the past two years as part of If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution's Performance in Residence programme within Edition VI—Event and Duration (2015–2016).¹ The publication is one half of this project, and is complemented by the sculptural performance *Gravitational Feel*, which will be presented for the first time in Amsterdam in November 2016.

If I Can't Dance started the Performance in Residence programme in 2010, as we wanted to commit to the long-term research of performance works from the past, in collaboration with guest curators and artists. While reenactment and its methods were central to the inauguration of the Performance in Residence series, as befits such vital programmes, we have since opened up its boundaries allowing for an extended interpretation of what performance 'research' might be.

It is within this vein that Moten and Tsang have collaborated to produce the sculptural performance *Gravitational Feel* as the companion to this book. Within the Performance in Residence programme their project is marked by a meaningful particularity—at the time of this publication's submission to print, the performance it relates to is yet to be realized. The text and images that unfold across these pages trace the work in process, introducing the reader to it in its virtuality. This is in keeping with Moten and Tsang's movement across the commission, working carefully not to foreclose it, but continually maintaining a space that is open to chance events and speculation, and for others to enter and inhabit. This is also seen in the many voices that have come to meld with and be referred to in the text. It is equally represented in its design, and we hope will be similarly experienced by those who find themselves in the future sculptural performance. As Moten and Tsang write in the book, "The research will be held by the ones who enact it, then dispersed as they disperse. [...] The research/experiment is in how to sense entanglement."

(Right Channel)

0:00

I'm late, a little bit, palpitating. Un-ironed. Radical inability properly to present myself. Disrespectable because it purports to be all, you know, um. Well whatever, that's beside the point. Um, although it might appear to be that one would need to explain why. And I'm just thinking about... the detail. Well, if you look at 'em for a minute you see that they're moving. Dark underneath and light on top. One just kinda rolling over the mountain.

1. If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution is dedicated to exploring the evolution and typology of performance and performativity in contemporary art, and does so through the production of artworks and thematic programmes across two-year editions. Since 2005, it has operated without a fixed presentation space, taking the model of collaborative working from the theatre to invest in elaborated programmes that develop through their enactment at each event and location over time. The title of the Performance in Residence pro-

gramme is a pun that points to our 'nomadic' institution and the elusive nature of performance. The 'in residence' also echoes our desire to have a work in our midst, and a researcher in our company: to care, play, exchange, learn, and sometimes struggle—all the things you do when living together. It also refers to our intention to let time be a medium instead of a commodity, allowing both the object of study and the researcher to breathe, grow, and move.

In *Gravitational Feel* this awareness takes shape in a multi-channel soundtrack and numerous strands of fabric rope, which draw inspiration from “quipu” or *talking knots*—a sophisticated form of Incan data and record collection using knotted string—and brings attention to the unique language of fabric.² Alternatively, one could see the sculpture’s form as a cat o’ nine tails changed from an instrument of domination and punishment to one of tactile touch and pleasure. It could otherwise be considered a node through which to make contact and bring what it finds into relation with a larger network. Suspended from moveable heads, these strands of fabric will hang shower-like, and move via contact with the bodies that come to brush between and beneath them. The accompanying multi-channel soundtrack, recorded by Moten and Tsang, will intensify the haptic environment with its directional sound waves. Within the work audiences will be invited to move through it at their own pace and according to their own interest, while at punctuated moments Moten and Tsang will be present, bringing together a greater density of audience and improvisational action.

As its published companion, *Who touched me?* takes the form of a missal—a liturgical book that contains all instructions and texts necessary for the celebration of mass throughout a year. The resulting text includes fragments of e-mail communications, notes, poetry, transcriptions of previous works, and essays—including, notably, parts of an essay by philosopher and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva with whom Moten and Tsang also frequently collaborate, in, for instance, their establishing of the Art Institute for Physical Sociology (a proposed interdisciplinary group of scholars and art practitioners interested in the sociological potential of quantum physics). In the book these elements are lined up so they can be traced together—or as they say “to feel and hear the thickness of the line”—moving from the earliest communication between Moten and Tsang, to the more recent bodies of text and talk that have congregated around the project, exemplifying the project’s movement from, and thinking towards, a lived experience of collaboration.

2. One needs only to look at the word “text” to see its intimate and etymological relationship to “texture” and to “textile,” and to think of the texture of a voice, and the weave of a story, for example.

Living Collaboratively

Moten and Tsang cohabit the roles of performance artist and poet, bringing together their respective practices: Moten is a poet and scholar who explores black studies, performance studies, poetry, and critical theory; and Tsang is an artist known for using performance, film, and installation to examine constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and the impact of these constructions on communities. Given the many sympathies and cross-connections between their work, they have described their collaboration as something that seemed to commence long before they knew each other.

Moten and Tsang began collaborating in 2014 through a long-distance experiment in communication, which saw them leave voicemail messages to each other every day over a two-week period. And while they never connected lines, the messages they left each other often riff on the ones just heard, textured by the different intonations of each of their voices and their particular uses of language. Despite the distance from one another, their messages are also characterized by moments of unexpected synchronicity—ghostly near misses of shared thoughts. The result of this is *Miss Communication and Mr. Re* (2014); their first collaborative work in which their voicemail messages form the soundtrack of a two-channel video featuring images of Moten and Tsang on facing screens. A transcript of this early work runs down the edges of the pages throughout this publication.

In a second collaborative work, *Girl Talk* (2015),³ Moten appears in a sun-drenched backyard. Lightly costumed in a maroon-coloured cape decorated with crystal lapels, he moves in front of Tsang's iPhone camera, spinning slightly, dancing, and raising his hands as if he is mid-song. Accompanying the footage is experimental musician Josiah Wise's rendition of the jazz standard from which the work gets its name. The soundtrack plays throughout the performance on screen and elevates the humbleness of the scene, which is played back in slow motion, to something bordering on rapture. Within these earlier collaborative works, what intrigued us most was how the known disciplines of Moten and Tsang respectively took alternating precedence within the collaboration. Both had moments of vulnerability and of confidence, but mutually they were participating in an exchange and play enabling what may come.

3. *Girl Talk* was presented as the preface to Moten and Tsang's Performance in Resistance research project as part of the If I Can't Dance Introductory Event at Cygnus Gymnasium on 24 January 2016. The programme was presented in an operational high school in Amsterdam, where *Girl Talk* was installed in the music room. Throughout the day the sound of Josiah Wise's voice could be heard and felt during the audience's movement through the school's corridors.

In a meeting about their project for *If I Can't Dance*, the conversation arrived at the idea of virtuosity, and the reference within the book's title to the scripture of Luke 8:45 that tells the story of a miracle in which a woman is healed by touching Jesus's coat, to which Jesus, who feels the virtue move from within him, responds "Who touched me?" This was followed by talk of the figure of the jazz virtuoso, and the question of how to become an instrument for the dispersal of virtue, which the collaboration of Moten and Tsang, and the works *Gravitational Feel* and *Who touched me?* reach out for.

As accompaniment to their forthcoming performance in Amsterdam in 2016, we invite you to touch and turn the pages of this book, to find your own path through its reading, and entanglements within its contents, and to mark the book's skin with notes if you wish, continuing the research that this project lays out and opens up.

1:00

Beautiful green bushes, and rose bushes, and lilac bushes, and olive trees, and cypress trees... it's too complicated. A lot of different colours of green, though. And white, and red, and rust, and pink, and yellow, and then blue and white. Kind of put it down, put pins down in that way. And I didn't hear it fully, or I didn't hear it at all, until too late. And now I heard it, and it's late but the knight always moves... what does the knight do? Well, it doesn't really matter cause it basically goes: two forward and one to the side.

We would like to thank Fred Moten and Wu Tsang for the openness and experimentation with which they have approached their respective practices, collaborative work, and participation within the Performance and Residence programme. We would also like to thank them for so openly enfold-ing us in this collaboration, and for the inspiring conversations that have crossed art, life, politics, and the very material of matter, with both ease and curiosity.

WHO TOUCHED ME?

MISS COMMUNICATION AND MR:RE

1:00

It's kinda, where like right in the dirt in the tumbleweeds mean so much more to anyone who grew up there than the lights.

Well, hmmm. Off-communicability. Dragged talk. Drag town, drag down. Like, drag, like, every kinda drag that, drag like—somebody pulling my coat—right? Like I'm trying to raise up my arm and somebody's pulling my arm, or—you know just, constrain. But it's not really, ahhh, anyway, in't particularly interested in wielding that much power.



We chose a rule of staggered missives. We committed to the non-exclusion of birds. Our model for remote intimacy and ritual is [redacted]. This is our near miss. Communication and mystery folded in the arms of our best regards, our beautifully imagined children, our lovers. Quickly we began to miss one another since we were meant for one another, cornered by one another in an off square, a failed cube and plaza, for circling inside. Our state of grace is a *missive bouquet*, a sound tree in every shade of green, which you are welcome to overhear and [redacted].

We aim. We miss. We live in the gaps between our intentions and the shit that doesn't work out. So many emotions caught in my pipe. I pound my chest to putter it out. *The machinations. Glittery enunciation.* The *first time I heard the* sound of your voice *it filled me with a sense of future perfect. The friendship I will have had.* Getting to know you. Sounding without thinking. Walking. Just walking and heart beating. Out of synch, but in time.

So cool to discover what you're doing while you're doing, to be attuned to your own.

I miss dialing, too. And I remember the old kind, before touchtone.

We've got a correspondence!!!! What is correspondence now? The fate of words in correspondence. Instagram cuts words.

No pauses no redos, description in lieu of picture.

Not gonna worry about the partial nature of yesterday's message.

"Because I'm in an Italian villa. Basil and lavender."

I've never described my room before, falling snow meteor lights, Dan Graham's cheap strip club, name is Tosh, her performer name is boychild, is Honeychild, sugar, like Christy Love.

That's ok!

1) Voice is continually lost and found; we continually lose and find our voices. What if we think of this as a social phenomenon but what if, at the same time, the sociality is dispersed? But is this *a priori* to the practice we are developing? Already, we are at practice together, remote, in some kind of out syncopation, 6 here, 3 there. Lost and found, less and more. The voice is more and less than itself. Not present to itself, voice's time is off. A practice of talking to one another. When we are together we miss one another. Voice goes past itself and goes past one another. A script drawn from a series of missed conversations. A form derived from miscommunication. We deliberately, as a matter of daily practice, miss one another, but from within a conversation, a mutuality of lost and found, of more + less than voice. And then we stage that offness, together, from room to room, yoked, even in the record, the daily meditation, of this missed communication. Articulation implies a separation, a distance, but the normative model of conversation and communication implies seamless connection. What if we simply foreground the communicative ruptures and displacements that are the essence of conversation? And we can make this sound like something. Like a Beckett television play but stripped down to the phonic level. A protocol: a certain number of words or sentences or phrases from our miscommunication, our space-time separated conversation, our quantum entanglement or spooky actions at a distance. This should tend towards music and dance, the inarticulacies of a kind of articulate or articulated song and dance. To stage, in co-presence, a troubled duet. Suspend skype while maintaining the commitment. So: articulation: what if the spatio-temporal distance that makes articulation/

2:00
Or one forward and two to the side.
It makes the same shape either way.
To go towards something and at the last minute step to the side. The "knight's move," the swerve, or something. The swerve. Now that's making me think of something else. It's always like an approximation. Or I woke up this morning and I was dreaming about so many things. But um, there's not as much room for edit, or I guess the editing conveys so much more. It's like what you don't say is as much as what you do say. I kind of miss... dialing. Expanding the role... possibly like, unanswerable. If you're gonna call someone, you're gonna go through with it.

We like to chat about the dresses we will wear tonight
We chew the fat about our hair and how the neighbors fight
Inconsequential things men really don't care to know
Become essential things that women find so apropos

I'm a dame
It's my game
All the same
They call it girl talk, talk, talk, talk
Girl talk

We all meow about the ups and downs of all our friends
The who, the why, the how, do we dish the dirt, it never ends
We're weaker sex, the speakin sex, you mortal males behold
Although we joke, we wouldn't trade you for a ton of gold

It's my plan
Take my hand
Please understand
This girl talk
Girl talk talks of you

We all meow about the ups and downs of all our friends
The who, the how, the why, do we dish the dirt, it never ends
We're weaker sex, the speakin sex, what males behold
Although we joke, we wouldn't trade you for a ton of gold

It's my plan
Please take my hand
Understand
This girl talk
Talks of you

*Adapted and performed by Josiah Wise, after Betty Carter's adaptation
and performance of lyrics by Bobby Troup and music by Neal Hefti*

directed

direct me

3:00

Or the anticipation... there's so much (sighs), there's such a moment of pause and decision-making, with each number that you press. A question. There has to be a question that I don't know the answer to. He died, he was, um, murdered. In a... he was like, it was a hate crime. I'm like losing my... sense of clarity around how we could have a sense of knowing this person and their struggle and yet, and yet we have no idea. It's not enough, it's almost like an equation and I've solved it—for now. You know? It's a har—yeah, it's like hard, it's... I think that's probably still true.