

Touch in Irish Performance Art: Haptic Encounters in *Becoming Beloved* (1995) and *The Touching Contract* (2016). Scene 8, 1& 2 Special Issue: Performance and Ireland (2020)

Abstract:

Over the last 50 years, Irish feminists have campaigned for women's sexual health and reproductive rights including access to contraception, legal abortion and choice in maternity care and childbirth. Recent cases like Ms. Y (2014); P.P. v HSE (2014); and Ms. B (2016); invite close scrutiny of the power dynamics relating to women's reproductive bodies in Ireland. This essay examines the haptic encounters in *Becoming Beloved* (1995) and *The Touching Contract* (2016), two performance-based artworks located in Dublin maternity hospitals. Both artworks centred the body as a site of production to interrogate these power dynamics by emphasizing autonomy and consent while engaging with site-specific locations. This essay charts the management of childbearing bodies in Ireland, looking specifically at issues concerning reproductive and sexual health, information, and consent. It details how Irish performance art has responded to the political, social and cultural climate of restrictions on women's bodies. *Becoming Beloved* and *The Touching Contract* both employed haptic encounters, multisensory perceptions composed of tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations that extended beyond a visual aesthetic. These haptic encounters contributed to a dimension of viewer engagement, integral in performance art to activate meaning. This article examines how these two artworks utilized haptic encounters to produce a situated, corporeal knowledge that critiqued the authority wielded over reproductive bodies by political, religious and medical establishments in Ireland.

Keywords: Irish Art; Embodiment; Haptic; Reproductive Rights; Feminism; Performance Art

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, Irish feminists have campaigned for women's sexual health and reproductive rights including access to contraception, legal abortion and choice in maternity care and childbirth. Recent cases like Ms. Y (2014); P.P. v HSE (2014); and Ms. B (2016); invite close scrutiny of the power dynamics relating to women's reproductive bodies in Ireland. This essay examines the haptic encounters in *Becoming Beloved* (1995) and *The Touching Contract* (2016), two performance-based artworks located in Dublin maternity hospitals. Both artworks centred the body as a site of production to interrogate these power dynamics by emphasizing autonomy and consent while engaging with site-specific locations. This essay charts the management of childbearing bodies in Ireland, looking specifically at issues concerning reproductive and sexual health, information, and consent. It details how Irish performance art has responded to the political, social and cultural climate of restrictions on women's bodies before moving to discuss *Becoming Beloved* and *The Touching Contract*. I consider how each work produced haptic encounters comprised of site, sound and aspects of embodiment that draw upon a situated, corporeal knowledge that critiqued the authority wielded over reproductive bodies by political, religious and medical establishments in Ireland.

In proposing to consider the senses in performance art, I am defining ‘haptic encounters’ as moments of multisensory perception composed of tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations that extend beyond a visual aesthetic. The generative work of Laura U. Marks is pertinent for thinking about how performance art facilitates haptic encounters for as she argues ‘Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.’ (Marks 2000: 2) Marks locates ‘haptic visuality’, a dynamic bodily relationship between looker and image, as emerging from experimental film processes that produce sensations enabling engagement beyond the visual inviting the viewer to respond in an intimate, embodied way that also facilitates the experience of other sensory impressions (2). In haptic visuality, the eyes ‘function like organs of touch’ while by contrast optical visuality, or seeing things at a distance, assumes a separation between the viewing subject and the object (162). Marks’ work is indebted to art historian Alois Riegl’s (1858-1905) ideas about haptic and optical modes of representation and Gilles Deleuze’s writings on the haptic, aesthetics and the ‘minority’ senses of smelling, touching and feeling.¹ Though Marks focused on haptic visuality in intercultural cinema, the concept of the haptic as encompassing proximity, closeness and intimacy is useful for thinking about how performance art, both live and to camera, also engages in multisensory haptic encounters.

In performance art, the body occupies multiple perspectives, as the primary medium artists often engage its corporeality and permeability; as the site of reception, the body of the witness participates in the shared making of meaning. Jennifer Fisher writes that the haptic sense renders ‘the surfaces of the body porous, being perceived at once inside, on the skin’s surface, and in external space.’ (Fisher 1997) Fisher argues that touch in performance art holds the radical capacity to decentre visual aesthetics. Tactility is both the capability of being touched or felt or responsiveness to stimulation of the sense of touch. Drawing upon F.T. Marinetti’s 1924 manifesto *Tactilism* as a starting point for understanding touch in art Fisher says:

As a communicative act, then, touch, in effect, incorporates the social interface as it dissolves the boundaries between subject and object. Acts of touching, as cultural events, presuppose affective encounters - the relation of ‘being touched’ and ‘being moved’. Touch performances propose qualities of feeling that impact powerfully and ideologically... There is a politics inherent in how touch is enacted and perceived. (Fisher 2007:167)

Mark Paterson identifies a conceptual slippage between touching and feeling, between cutaneous contact and its metaphorical, affective and emotive meanings of being ‘touched’, therefore when discussing haptic encounters in performance art it is beneficial think about how and why a performance ‘touches’ us. (Patterson 2007: 6) Furthermore, if as suggested by André Lepecki and Sally Banes that activating the senses in performance holds the potential to ‘reveal histories’, simultaneously accounting for and critiquing ‘hegemonic or majoritarian politics of the perceptible and the imperceptible, of the significant and the insignificant...’, then haptic encounters can potentially bring us into close proximity with marginalised histories. (Lepecki and Banes 2007: 2) This essay examines how the haptic encounters offered in *Becoming Beloved* and *The Touching Contract* physically and psychically touch us.

¹For further reading see Deleuze, G and Guattari, F (2011) *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (translated by B. Massumi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.496.

The ‘Management’ of Women Bodies

The history of Ireland’s conservative, paternalistic treatment of women’s reproductive and sexual health, particularly restrictions on contraception and abortion and the management of birthing bodies has been particularly fraught. The sale and import of contraception were banned under the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* (1935). *McGee vs The Attorney General* (1973), a case taken by a mother of four for whom further pregnancies would result in maternal death, established the constitutional right to avail of birth control. It later became legally available in 1979 but only for ‘bona fide’ family planning for married couples, leaving doctors to determine which requests were ‘genuine’. The insertion of the pro-life Eighth Amendment (1983) to the *Irish Constitution* (Article 40.3.3) granted equal rights to life between mother and foetus.² Later, distributing information about abortion services outside the State and assisting women to travel abroad was prohibited.³ *The Regulation of Information (Services outside the State for the Termination of Pregnancies) Act* (1995) required crisis pregnancy services to discuss parenting and adoption before giving information about abortion services abroad. At the heart of these restrictions and regulations was a fundamental distrust for women to make knowledgeable, informed decisions about their own reproductive bodies.⁴

In the 1990s, a number of alarming scandals came to light relating to the treatment of women’s birthing bodies. In 1994, the Irish Blood Transfusion Board (1994) revealed it failed to properly screen blood used to manufacture Anti-D immunoglobulin given to Rhesus Negative mothers in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in over 1500 women contracting Hepatitis C. Most only realised they had the disease when the scandal was made public. In 1999, Consultant Obstetrician Michael Neary was suspended from medical practice pending investigation. A later inquiry determined that he undertook 129 unnecessary peripartum hysterectomies without consent between 1974-1998. In 1999, historian Jacqueline Morrissey uncovered the historic use of non-consensual symphysiotomy, a surgical procedure that involved splitting the symphysis ligament, the joint at the pubic bone to widen the pelvis for birth. Symphysiotomy was reintroduced into Ireland in 1944 at the Catholic-run National Maternity Hospital to prevent women from having limited births, with nearly 1,500 women subjected to this procedure without their knowledge. These examples of medical negligence demonstrate the potentially devastating consequences of medical touch upon women’s bodies.

In maternity care, informed medical consent places a woman and her health at the centre of its services, meaning that a patient has the right to make decisions about their treatment even if their decision is medically inadvisable. Before the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, the HSE’s National Consent Policy explicitly stated:

The consent of a pregnant woman is required for all health and social care interventions. However, because of the constitutional provisions on the right to life of the ‘unborn’, there is significant legal uncertainty regarding the extent of a pregnant woman’s right to refuse treatment in circumstances in which the refusal would put the life of a viable foetus at serious risk. In such circumstances, legal advice should be sought as to whether an application to the High Court is necessary. (National Consent Policy)

² Abortion was already illegal under the Offences Against the Person Act (1861). Between 1980-2018 174,603 women travelled to England from Ireland to obtain an abortion.

³ *AG (SPUC) v Open Door Counselling Ltd.* (1988) and *SPUC v Grogan* (1989) were later overturned by the 13th and 14th Amendments (1992).

⁴ The Eighth was repealed on 25 May 2018 and abortion access was implemented 1 January 2019.

In 2014, Miss Y, an asylum seeker pregnant as a result of rape repeatedly sought a termination. After illegally travelling to obtain one in the UK, she was admitted to a mental health facility and transferred without consent to a maternity hospital where she was told the baby was viable. The State applied to forcibly carry out a caesarean delivery to which she eventually consented. Later she brought a civil damage case for alleged trespass, assault and battery; negligence; false imprisonment; and intentional infliction of emotional harm and suffering. (Irish Times 2016) P.P. vs HSE (2014) concerned a pregnant 26-year old mother of two who, although clinically dead, was kept on life support for four weeks as medics erroneously believed to remove it would breach the Eighth Amendment. In 2016, the HSE sought a court order against Ms B, a 40-week pregnant woman, for forced sedation and a c-section, though she clearly understood the risks associated with vaginal delivery after previous c-sections. The High Court found that to order this would amount to a grievous assault. When women are denied agency over their bodies, considered a threat to their unborn children, or forced to endure invasive, violating medical touches it highlights the complex negotiations between autonomy, knowledge and bodies in Ireland.

Embodiment in Irish Performance Art

In the last 20 years, Irish performance art has responded to and creatively engaged with the various aspects of the histories of embodied experiences in Ireland. Embodiment is subjectivity and experience ‘as lived and felt in the flesh.’ (Young 2005: 7). Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘situated knowledge’, foregrounds the body as a site of knowledge production advancing ‘a politics and epistemology of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims’, Haraway explains that situated knowledge is ‘the view from the body’. (Haraway 1988: 589). Rogowska-Stangret suggests that Haraway’s situated knowledge demands careful attention ‘to power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production.’ (Rogowska-Stangret 2018) Knowledge itself is relational, produced in an encounter with others. Rosi Braidotti explains: “Feminist knowledge is an interactive process that brings out aspects of our existence, especially our own implications of power, that we had not noticed before.” (Braidotti 2011: 16) If performance is a way of knowing, then certain feminist performances produce knowledge about the political, social and cultural treatment of women’s bodies while also assessing our own relationship to that power, recognising that not all inequalities are distributed evenly.

The Appearances Project (1999-2001) a feminist, intergenerational collaboration by Pauline Cummins, Sandra Johnston and Frances Mezzetti, composed of four live performances *Temperate, Fathom, Broad Daylight* and *Holy Ground*, incorporated somatic gestures to form a bodily performance language that explored issues around sexuality, violence, power and agency. Amanda Coogan’s *Fountain* (2001) dealt with the shame and silencing of women’s sexuality when, with legs spread and her vulva framed in a circle of light, she urinated in front of an audience. While referencing the death of Anne Lovett, a 15-year-old girl in Granard who died giving birth in the town’s grotto to the Virgin Mary (1984), Coogan’s performance can also be read as an embodied, animated response to Gustav Courbet’s passive *L’Origin Du Monde* (1866). Áine Phillips’s visceral and ritualistic *Sex, Birth and Death* (2003) explored the continuum of female sexuality particularly the erotics of birth alongside abortion. Michelle Browne’s *The Bearer* (2009) precariously transported fragile eggs on her head. As their brittle shells and yolky secretions were trampled underfoot by her stiletto heels, the work commented on women’s perceived maternal duties to the Irish nation.

Helena Walsh's embodied performance *In Pursuit of Pleasure* (2012) took Mother and Baby homes and shame as its genesis as her performance explored the historical repression of women's sexuality and autonomy. Máiréad Delaney's deeply affective live performance *At What Point It Breaks* (2017) referencing symphysiotomy raised questions about ethics and culpability when she broke tree branches in half with her body (Antosik-Parsons 2019). In Laura O'Connor's simultaneously live and digitally broadcast performance *Uncomfortable State* (2017), the artist applied green paint to her body, her skin becoming a green screen signalling the erasure of women's bodies under the restriction of reproductive rights on the island of Ireland (Putnam 2018). Explorations of maternal embodiment, autonomy and consent in EL Putnam's performance works intriguingly engage wearable, haptic digital technologies. *Fertile Ground* (2017) and *Ember* (2018) proposed sensory responses to experiences of pregnant embodiment under the Eighth Amendment. Putnam and Antosik-Parsons's collaborative live performance *Mutualism* (2019) explored interspecies reproductive relationships, consent and reciprocity. In Amy Walsh's performative self-portraits *Mná na hÉireann* (2019) she contorted her body with a bright red ribbon embodying the letters assigned to women who took cases against Ireland to challenge the harsh restrictions on abortion, powerful reminder of the lived experiences behind these pseudonyms. The encounter with the body afforded by these performance works articulate intriguing possibilities for the political mobilisation of the senses in relation to the meanings ascribed to women's bodies in an Irish cultural context.

Becoming Beloved

Pauline Cummins's experimental four-minute looped video, *Becoming Beloved* depicted the underwater movements of infants, children and parents swimming intercut with moving images of a seahorse, goldfish and an unborn child in the womb. It was commissioned in 1994 for *Síolru*, an arts programme that marked the centenary of the National Maternity Hospital. It was installed on a television monitor built into a tall black housing, sited at the end of a corridor outside the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Cummins was interested in the 'diving reflex', also known as the bradycardic response. When submerged in water infants up to 6 months old instinctively hold their breath and slow their heart rate, reducing blood circulation to their extremities. She understood this as representative of the autonomous nature of the baby's survival. The technology in this work negotiates different experiences of embodiment and the relationship between bodies. Cummins, who self-admittedly was not a confident swimmer out of her depths, learned to scuba dive to be able to film underwater. This performance-based part of the work involved a perceived risk for Cummins and that experiential aspect of chance resonates throughout the work.

Cummins played with different multisensory aspects of the Hi8 video, an analogue format with 400 lines of resolution, by altering colour, layering imagery, and capturing the reflections on the surfaces of the water refracting light in different ways. Characteristics inherent in video such as low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital manipulation and decay are hallmarks of haptic visuality. (Marks 2000: 9) In *Becoming Beloved* these manipulations were sensual, causing the eyes to gently caress these images, like the water that lapped at these bodies. Marks connects analogue technology and the body saying "...video has a body that is analogous to the visual and electronic reality to which the video camera or videotape was exposed. It perceives the world and expresses its perception to viewers." (Marks 2002: 148). The inclusion of ultrasound and sonogram technology in *Becoming Beloved* also invoked haptic encounters. The ultrasound is a diagnostic exam in which high-frequency sound waves bounce off tissue and back to the transducer probe pressing against and moving over the flesh.

The computer interprets these sound waves creating the sonogram. In reproductive politics the deployment of the foetal sonogram is used by pro-life supporters to buttress their claims to the authenticity of the image or the 'seeing is believing' approach, advancing the idea that if wombs had windows no person would choose abortion. Yet the sonogram is not a visual picture but a mapping of tissues. *Becoming Beloved* incorporates the ultrasound exam, the radiographer's hand moving the probe against the skin, communicating information through hushed tones to the woman, while the screen displays the sonogram contained within the outline of two moving hands. [Fig 1] In *Becoming Beloved* the screen itself became the skin of the embodied pregnant woman while my haptic vision was encouraged to graze the surface of that body. I found myself instinctively pressing my hand against my abdomen, in an embodied response to the intimate sensation this made me recall. [Insert Fig 1 here]

The Touching Contract

Sarah Browne and Jesse Jones's live participatory event *The Touching Contract* (2016) was staged in the Pillar Room, Rotunda Hospital. It was part of a series of works co-commissioned by Artangel and CREATE collectively titled *In the Shadow of the State* bringing together law, material culture, music and the historical importance of specific sites in relation to the female body. *The Touching Contract* was part of the Art Council of Ireland's *Art: 2016* programme that placed arts at the centenary of 1916 Easter Rising. *The Touching Contract* was also performed in London; *The Truncheon and the Speculum* in Liverpool and *Of Milk and Marble* in Derry with each work taking on a different meaning specific to each location. In Dublin, the work was staged on three consecutive days in September 2016 on a weekend that coincided with the Abortion Rights Campaign's 5th annual March for Choice.

[Insert Fig 2 here]

The work took place in two parts, the first was the signing of a legal contract that had been drawn up in conjunction with feminist legal scholar Máiréad Enright. Participants were invited to read and sign the contract provided which outlined the possibilities of touch and the subsequent feelings that might arise during the performance. After consenting to participate, the contract was brought to a table where it was placed into an envelope and affixed with a seal that was embossed with a simple triangular shape. [Figure 2] Once this was completed the group entered the Pillar Room where a triangle sounded and participants fell silent. Seven performers dressed in light blue clothing and white shoes vaguely referenced hospital staff engaged participants in a series of gestures and actions. The participants' bodies were impelled around the space under the non-verbal guidance of the performers. Some interactions referenced medical visits, the taking of pulse or listening to a heartbeat, two different types of touches that listened to and felt the body. Others were made to hold out their arms and legs as they were briskly frisked, referencing the touch of law enforcement, though in a maternity hospital this alludes to how women's bodies have been treated with suspicion and perceived as a risk, to themselves and to their unborn children. The performers held earphones to the ears of some participants and one woman was blessed with earbuds, referencing the interference of Catholicism on women's reproductive and sexual health in Ireland. Towards the end of the performance, we were arranged in a concentric cluster, each extending an arm to touch the person in front of them, standing motionless. Each was then gently touched by a performer and led from the circle. Before I exited the Pillar Room, a performer and I warmly embraced, our bodies briefly pressing together. Returning to the anteroom, the homely smell of hot buttered toast and tea was waiting, triggering a strong sensory memory of the first food and drink I consumed in that very hospital after giving birth.

Haptic Encounters in *Becoming Beloved* and *The Touching Contract*

Becoming Beloved and *The Touching Contract* are two works with different concerns, created at different points in recent Irish history, yet both centre on touch, autonomy and the female body. Each was a process-based work that engaged broader communities, seeking out the wealth of embodied knowledge those communities had to offer. For Cummins it meant establishing trust with parents and children at a local swimming class, observing the parent/child dynamics of those classes, learning how to scuba dive and importantly working closely with the midwives in the NICU ward in Holles Street who had experience caring for premature and high-risk newborns while supporting their families. For Browne and Jones, it was located in collaboration with experts in law, cultural history, medicine and activists with knowledge and experiences of State control and a series of workshops with performers from which different figurations of touch emerged. Importantly, both works were sited in Dublin maternity hospitals, places that bear the resonances and traces of past bodies, the complicated feelings of joy, fear, sadness and ambiguity that surround the experiences of births and the deaths that occurred in each.

The staging of *The Touching Contract* in the Rotunda probed how women's bodies have been historically defined by patriarchal medical discourses. Founded in 1745, the Rotunda was the first lying-in hospital in Europe, at a time when the developing practice of male-dominated obstetrics was discrediting the embodied knowledge of traditional midwifery practice. Advancing essentialist ideas about the inherent weakness of women in childbirth, they implemented strict rules about birthing bodies such as time restrictions on labour, delivery positions and the use of forceps when not fully dilated. Writing on how the patriarchal authority of obstetrics pathologized the female birthing body, Jo Murphy-Lawless asserted: 'women undergoing childbirth have been subject to a definition of themselves which originated within male medical discourse.' (Murphy-Lawless 1992: 83) The performers held their hands in a triangular shape, framing their mouths, their exposed teeth made rapid clicking sounds like an animated vagina dentata. [Figure 3] When the triangular shaped hands were held over the pubic area, it evoked the gesture of the Sheela na gig, a stone-carved grotesque female figure with an exposed vulva thought to represent the continuum of live giving, death and renewal. (Freitag 2004: 10) In referencing the subversive folklore of the vagina dentata and the Sheela na gig, *The Touching Contract* advocated for knowledge and power found within the body.

[Insert Fig 3 here]

Becoming Beloved was part of an arts programme celebrating the centenary of the National Maternity Hospital, the largest Catholic-run maternity hospital in Ireland. But Cummins subversively offered an alternative view to giving birth in a hospital. Cummins had three home births though the option has not been widely available. The 1970 Health Act granted a legal entitlement to home birth services, but a later Supreme Court ruling in November 2003 found that health boards had no statutory obligation to provide for home births under that act. According to Marie O'Connor, Irish women who choose home births 'saw pregnancy and birth as 'natural', refusing to accept the medical idea that every birth is inherently pathological.' (O'Connor 2006: 113) The opportunity for this birthing option has dwindled in recent years as it is increasingly difficult for midwives to get clinical indemnity coverage, as was the case with Philomena Canning's drawn-out dispute with the HSE (2015-2019). The late midwife was a staunch advocate of home birth and choice in childbirth, whose professional indemnity was withdrawn by the HSE on unfounded grounds and whose practice was decimated as a result. Canning's treatment echoed that of Ann Kelly, a high profile domiciliary midwife with over

300 successfully delivered home births who in the mid-1990s had a complaint made against her by the former master of Holles Street, Dr Peter Boylan but who was later vindicated.

Nearly a decade prior to the creation of *Becoming Beloved* Cummins's positive home birthing experiences led her to create *Ann Kelly is a Midwife* (1986), a work that directly challenged the devaluing of midwives' knowledge. (Antosik-Parsons 2015: 181) The word midwife means 'with woman', while in Irish the term is 'bean ghlúine', bean meaning woman and ghlúine from the word 'glúin' for knee. The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland describes bean ghlúine as 'many-layered depicting the midwife with the woman, both on their knees, one birthing and one supporting'. (www.nmbi.ie) The word 'glúin' also means 'generation', suggesting that midwives have aimed to support and empower pregnant and birthing women for generations. It is also relevant that Cummins previously installed the mural *Celebration: The Beginning of Labour* (1984) in Holles Street which was censored after one week without her consent, possibly because of its joyous nude figures, meaning essentially Cummins's own productive labour was devalued by that institution. *Becoming Beloved* challenged various aspects of the medicalisation of birth not only putting situated, bodily knowledge to the fore, but advocating for the care, continuity and holistic support of pregnant women and new mothers that midwifery puts at the heart of its practice.

The aural elements interwoven in each of these works further enabled haptic encounters. *Becoming Beloved* encompassed different haptic textures, for example when the sounds of children shrieking with delight or parental encouragement echo off the slick, tiled surfaces of the indoor pool. As the light danced in abstract patterns on the swells and reflections of water, so too did the pleasant cacophony of sounds. The plunge of bodies submerged into the pool's depths provoked a powerful sensory memory of water gently lapping against my skin. The sounds from above and underwater had markedly different sensory qualities. Above water were the animated sounds of people enjoying the pool. Below the main sound was Cummins's breath, filtered through the respirator of the scuba gear held firmly in her mouth, released into hundreds of tiny pulsating air bubbles that float to the surface. In *The Place of Breath in Cinema* Davina Quinlivan theorises 'Embodied relation is made possible through breathing', uniting inside and out. (Quinlivan 2012: 59) Throughout *Becoming Beloved*, the underwater imagery is accompanied by the sound of Cummins breathing. This serves as a reminder of the importance of breath for the survival of tiny infants. The use of the scuba gear as a breathing mechanism for Cummins contrasted with the infants instinctual reflex of breath-holding underwater. The embodied presence of the scuba gear in the performance alluded to the respiratory support of premature infants and the special care needed to ensure their survival. A child swam across the screen tiny bubbles of her expelled breath rising to the water's surface. Through the different textures of the breath, I became aware of my own body's rise and fall of breath, these haptic encounters bringing me into proximity with the body's surface and depths.

Sound in *The Touching Contract* also facilitated an experience of the body through its surface and interior. When the loud reggae music of Inner Circle's 'Sweat (A La La La La Long)' (1992) blasted out of tall speakers placed around the room, the repetitive lyrics 'Girl I want to make you sweat, sweat till you can't sweat no more and if you cry out, I'm gonna push it some more', took on a different meaning sited in the hospital. The song was an earworm, it's sonic touch resonating through the body, triggering certain stimuli that prompted proprioceptive awareness. Marks proposes that booming music produces haptic sound that inhabits the chest cavity 'mov[ing] my body from the inside.' (Marks 2000: 183) Quinlivan elaborates on haptic sound describing it as 'the grain of hearing', arguing that the bodily resonances it produces is an important aspect of haptic perception. (Quinlivan 2012: 137) These vibrating bodily

resonances suggested the corporeal experience of labour during which uterine contractions rhythmically pulsate from within the body, though its varying intensities perceived internally and externally. Later I experienced this song as an intense ‘cognitive itch’, a phenomenon in which certain properties of music like simplicity, repetition, and incongruous features can excite an abnormal reaction in the brain leading to a need to ‘scratch’ the itch by singing or playing the song repeatedly in the mind. (Kellaris 2018: 848). Unable to escape the maddening replay of this irritant inside my head, the lyrics were disturbing as I wondered about their meaning with regard to women’s bodily encounters with the State.

Each work facilitated haptic encounters to articulate different experiences of embodiment. In *Becoming Beloved* water was embodied, it touched, caressed and held, mimicking the protective amniotic fluid that cushions the growing foetus while facilitating an exchange of nutrients, antibodies and hormones. A fecund woman’s body bobbing up and down in the pool encouraged identification with weightless experience of buoyancy one feels when floating. [Figure 4] The different ‘waves’ present in this work enables an understanding of embodiment. A wave can be a disturbance, a moving ridge or swell on the surface of a liquid body, like the gentle waves of the flowing stream in the work. Connecting to the sensory, a wave can also be surge, or rush of feeling, projecting the affective connection between mother and infant. It might also describe the throbbing contractions experienced during labour as the body prepares for birth. These pains often imagined as waves, start small and build to a climax before falling away again.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

In *Becoming Beloved* the skin became surface and a receptor through which sensations were registered. Touch was denoted through the hands, invoking ‘the sense of touch through identification.’ (Marks 2002: 171) The imagery transitioned between water, outstretched hands and people swimming using their hands to propel their bodies through the water. When a pregnant woman swam past, two hands appeared cradling a ‘live’ sonogram, when the hands closed, the sonogram disappeared. Flowing water gently washed back and forth the textured exoskeleton of a seahorse across the surface of an upturned hand. A 9 week-old infant swam between two women and the image froze before the infant reached the waiting woman’s outstretched hands. [Figure 5] Within this gap I instinctively yearned to bridge the movement between those three bodies, to make that interrupted bodily connection. The sensations produced in the haptic encounters in *Becoming Beloved* provoked consideration of the power dynamics between bodies in childbirth.

[Insert Fig 5 here]

Experiences of embodiment through touch in *The Touching Contract* revealed a hierarchy of power over certain bodies. As participants were subjected to different experiences of touch they also witnessed others being touched. Bound up in the experience of touch was the anticipation of contact between bodies. Fisher explains ‘... anxieties about touch reveal uneasiness about embodiment itself, especially because it is a reflexive mode of tactility that perceives corporeal awareness.’ (Fisher 2007: 173) The consent form of *The Touching Contract* stipulated that participants would receive ‘improvised, direct and non-forceful touches’ by female performers. Listing possible risks, it noted people may encounter a range of sensations including embarrassment, arousal, boredom, awkwardness and sense of social difference highlighted through the interpretation of performance based on their gender, age, class, sexuality and ethnicity. Indeed, this served as a reminder that while some may have the privilege of knowing caring touches, others might experience touch as cruel and damaging.

As a witness to performance, we bring with us our personal histories and shared understandings of the socio-cultural aspects of touch. Reflecting on the haptic encounters of *The Touching Contract*, I found myself recalling my experience in the Rotunda eight years earlier when a doctor performed a non-consensual membrane sweep that resulted in traumatic childbirth. This was compounded by the memory of my body jostling through the large crowd gathered at Merrion Square earlier that day as people slowed to read my sign that proclaimed: 'I am 1 of (at least) 160K women who has travelled from Ireland for an abortion. We are your mothers, sisters, daughters & friends who have faced crisis pregnancies, often alone. We will no longer be shamed and silenced.' Coupled with the feelings of righteous anger from that earlier protest, my perceptions of the touch encountered during *The Touching Contract* enabled me to experience my body in that site of historical, cultural and personal significance in a way that was both deeply moving and disturbing.

Conclusion

The multisensory haptic encounters in *Becoming Beloved* and *The Touching Contract* activated site, sound and embodiment to navigate autonomy, knowledge and women's bodies in Ireland. *Becoming Beloved* was an intimate, subversive work that advocated for women's agency and autonomy in maternity care and childbirth, enabling one to occupy multiple perspectives as one was brought into contact with the surface and depths of the body. *The Touching Contract* foregrounded the power dynamics of touch, consent and the body against the setting of the maternity hospital revealing the hierarchy of power over bodies. Though haptic encounters in performance art begin with one's own bodily experiences, they also comment more widely on the socio-cultural aspects of touch. *The Touching Contract* encouraged reflection about the invasive touch of other institutions like Magdalene Laundries, Industrial Schools, Mother and Baby Homes and present-day Direct Provision detention centres. Although the Eighth Amendment was repealed in 2018, the legacies of control over women's bodies still reverberates throughout the State in different ways. It can be found in the victim-blaming defence in a Cork rape trial (November 2018) when a solicitor suggested that a woman's lacy thong was a sign of her consent, leading to public outcry and 'This is Not Consent' underwear protests. Even as recently as June 2019, a senior consultant at St Luke's Hospital, Kilkenny was suspended pending medical investigation for conducting 'exploratory' gynaecological work on five women patients without consent. These failures to place women's autonomy and informed decision making as paramount belie the deep-rooted paternalistic approach of women's bodies. Performance art that activates haptic encounters not only confronts the power dynamics between political, social and cultural institutions and bodies, but these encounters also offer radical possibilities for rethinking the meaning of our bodily experiences in proximity to others.

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