

Always Participating

Faye Driscoll's "Thank You For Coming" Series

Text: Miriam Felton-Dansky

"Thank You For Coming: Play" © Marina Levitskaya

Any choreographer's work could offer an occasion for contemplating the strangeness of dance in summer 2020. For considering the agony – for anyone whose pre-Covid-19 life centered around live performance – of having artistic work available in every streaming and digital format, but unavailable in real, collective time and space. Yet not every choreographer could make a work that is both insistently itself and also a profound inquiry into the nature of all live performance. American choreographer Faye Driscoll already has.

Faye Driscoll's "Thank You For Coming" series, whose three performance works premiered between 2014 and 2019 (followed by a retrospective installation in spring 2020), make a case for the continued need to gather in space, watching live art together. They do this without essentializing performance: without suggesting dance or theater are always one way or never another, without romantically proposing that liveness is inherently more magical than screens, or that communal action in society necessarily follows from communal experience in live art. "Thank You For Coming" is political without superficial topicality, participatory without being coercive, and ritualistic without demanding spiritual allegiances of its audiences. Its component parts get audience members to move their bodies – in fact, they train us to do it.

Driscoll, who studied at New York University Tisch School of the Arts, came of age in a late-1990s American dance world where the artistic legacy of Judson Dance still dominated Yvonne Rainer's "No Manifesto", well-known for its rejection of emotion, spectacle, and the commodification of the dancer's pose, is one of the best-known articulations of the often-spare, utilitarian Judson aesthetic. Rainer was responding to a heritage of emotional, sensationalizing, and sometimes essentializing modern dance, and – as the scholar Carrie Lambert-Beatty has argued – was protesting the spectacularizing effects of Vietnam war photography and television footage¹. Rainer invited audience members to watch her, but not to sensationalize her body or its movement.

Driscoll's work doesn't sensationalize either, but it is highly interested in sensation and in exploring a wide and sometimes maximalist emotional palette. As a young artist, she loved the work of theatermakers like director Richard Foreman, famous for his sensory-overload design, fracturing of performance time, and his use of emotion to investigate consciousness rather than tell conventional stories. Driscoll's dance works often revel in the intersection of old-fashioned theatrical elements and queer aesthetics – wigs, costume changes, exaggerated poses – in combination with precise movement and more open-ended explorations that gesture to the history of performance art (in her 2012 duet "You're Me", for instance, she and her dance partner smear messy, multicolored paint on their bodies)². Driscoll's engagement with theater has also taken the form of choreographing movement for theatrical work: she has choreographed for the writer/performer Taylor Mac and has a longstanding collaboration with playwright/director Young Jean Lee, both on and off Broadway. The last two decades of New York-based performance have witnessed a flourishing of interdisciplinary dance/theater work, and Driscoll is a leader in merging and mediating these disciplines, speaking eloquently to and within both.

"Thank You For Coming" (TYFC) is a masterwork that searches deeply for the nature and necessity of live interaction between performers and their audiences. Its first installment, "TYFC: Attendance", is an assessment of what cooperation between performers and spectators can look like, and – as Driscoll expressed to me in a conversation – asks whether collective joy can still be acceptable, even desirable, in radical and progressive politics and spaces that are often focused on critique. The performance begins with a careful accounting of each audience member, as box office staff write down our first names. I assumed this was an administrative necessity, until the dancers



"Thank You For Coming: Attendance" © Maria Baranova



“Thank You For Coming: Space” © Maria Baranova

began singing our names as part of a song celebrating our attendance – a song that is joyful, appreciative, and necessarily different every night.

“TYFC: Attendance” testifies to Driscoll’s accomplished merging of abstraction with clearly representational form. Standing on a central platform with spectators sprawled on the floor, the dancers hold each other’s bodies, mutating as an amorphous mass. Arms and legs tangle together, the collection of bodies stretch and lean precipitously towards the audience, then into us. We find dancers on our laps, rolling comfortably on our legs. Then, having left the platform, the dancers strip off its canvas top to expose a collection of benches, which they push apart, revealing Driscoll herself beneath. Is her presence under the platform a metaphor for her role in the performance: holding structure for the dancers’ mutating shapes, then dispersing them into the more theatrically recognizable interactions that follow? (Maybe – Driscoll offers meaning in multiple dimensions, and always as an invitation, not a command.) Eventually, spectators are invited to join a joyous maypole-style dance, holding ribbons that stream and tangle in the air.

“Do you know who I am?” inquires a portion of the audience in unison.
“No, but I’m glad we met!”

“Thank You For Coming: Play” interrogates the process and structures of theatrical dialogue and story, freed from long-

form narrative and celebrated on their own terms. The piece begins with micro-exchanges in the form of audience call-and-response led by Driscoll and her performers. “Do you know who I am?” inquires a portion of the audience in unison. “No, but I’m glad we met!” choruses another group good-naturedly. Other exchanges, filled with feeling and free of backstory, follow. Later, the white flats behind the performers are reconfigured into a kind of miniature theater set, with two wings and an upstage wall, framing a series of tiny dramas that are exaggerated dialogues with wry, deliberate incongruity between choreography, costume, and story. The work is deceptively casual; it would be easy to mistake Driscoll’s precisely arranged words, their lack of literal correspondence to the dancers’ movements, and the profusion of brightly-colored fringe, wigs, and bikini tops, for undisciplined improvisation or rehearsal-style play. It is play – but the most highly disciplined kind, because it is play that interrogates why we engage with one another, what participation in live performance requires and means. (“TYFC: Play” had its New York premiere shortly after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, at a moment when rethinking participation and engagement had suddenly become urgently necessary.)

“Thank You for Coming: Space”, which premiered in 2019 at Montclair State University’s Alexander Kasser Theater, is a solo of sorts, performed by Driscoll with the assistance of audience members. A pulley system threads its way through the upper reaches of the white playing space, and an assortment of props dangle from ropes – a lemon, a sheaf of branches, small sandbags. (Artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin did the visual

design for the entire trilogy, as well as for “Come On In”, the installation that followed.) “TYFC: Space”, like “Attendance” and “Play”, is a secular ritual, focused this time on absence and death, both the collective and abstract experience of grief (a contrast to the ecstatic “Attendance”), and, as we learn in the last portion of the piece, an expression of personal loss. Spectators assist Driscoll in creating rhythms – hands patter on thighs, sandbags smack the floor, Driscoll roars and keens into a microphone, then reiterates the sounds using a loop pedal. She eases her body into positions of death, suggested by art-historical imagery pinned to the floor and walls along the theater entrance. Finally, she enters a sort of shrine to a dead parent, holding up a hairbrush, a medicine bottle, memorializing the smallest and most personal detritus of a life.

As Driscoll pointed out to me, the series narrows down the number of people in the room until, in the final portion – the installation mounted at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis this spring – the spectator is left alone. “Come On In” is a true retrospective that demands somatic as well as aesthetic memory, even if it’s the memory of an event that the gallery-goer never attended. The visitor enters a softly-lit, plush-carpeted gallery fitted with boxes the size of beds, upholstered in soft white canvas. Fitting headphones over her ears, she hears Driscoll’s voice inviting her to slow down, to assume gentle poses, moving her body as she hears phrases and incantations from all three performance pieces in the trilogy. The installation (now partially available as a digital experience through the Walker’s website) uses the visitor’s body as the primary exhibit: something to experience, and something for other visitors to see. In a recent interview filmed by the Walker, Driscoll sug-

gests that participants might appear to one another like “glimmers of live sculptures.”³

All three installments of the trilogy begin by celebrating what is often obvious and invisible in live performance: that we’ve come together, in a space, to look and perhaps even touch. (“We are always participating in this world, whether we acknowledge that or feel that or want that,” Driscoll says in the Walker interview.)⁴ “Attendance” begins with a sung-through curtain speech, fire exit information and other practicalities set to gorgeous melody. “Play” opens with the acknowledgment, by performers, that spectators might not know them personally, but have come to see them all the same. And “Space” begins with a long benediction, a curtain speech in which Driscoll welcomes us to the theater and imagines all that it might have taken us to arrive there: how we might have planned our evening, purchased a ticket, boarded a bus or parked in a parking lot. These long introductions remind us that we are witnessing a live event, ask us not to take for granted our access to transportation, to the chair we sit on and the lights illuminating the space. Now that we have no access to such experiences, perhaps we’ll experience gratitude for them afresh. In the meantime, we have Driscoll’s work to remind us why they matter, the memory of her performances, and the promise of performances to come. 📌

1 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer’s Trio A,” *October*, Vol. 89 (Summer 1999), 87–112.

2 I am grateful to Driscoll for offering this context in conversation and over email to me.

3 Faye Driscoll in Miriam Felton-Dansky, “Thank You for Coming: Faye Driscoll on Participation, Performance, and Community,” *Walker Reader*, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/watch-faye-driscoll-artspeaks>, accessed June 21, 2020.

4 Faye Driscoll in Miriam Felton-Dansky, “Thank You for Coming: Faye Driscoll on Participation, Performance, and Community.”



View of the exhibition “Faye Driscoll: Come On In”, Walker Art Center, 2020 © Bobby Rogers, Walker Art Center