

## **Tactile Composition**

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### **[korte inleiding / samenvatting]**

I create sculptural and spatial installations that invite an audience or participants to interact with bodies, organisms, objects and materials in a non-hierarchical manner. My aim is to raise awareness of our *reciprocal* nature of being in the world. I share the view of philosopher Jane Bennett who states that all materialities have their own form of agency and have a dynamic relation with their surroundings.<sup>i</sup> To experience this open world view, my installations provide time and space for the audience or participants to explore the ‘events’<sup>ii</sup> created by the reciprocal relation between their own bodies and other materialities. I employ performance strategies, like multi sensorial activation, spatial arrangement (scenography) or guided tour, to activate the audience or participants to become sensitive to a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects.<sup>iii</sup>

### **[Personalia/bio]**

Marloeke van der Vlugt is a Dutch artist and researcher. She graduated from the University of Amsterdam with a practice-based research project about the relation between space, movement and body (interrelated thesis and performance). She studied Scenography at Goldsmith’s Academy and Choreography at the Laban Centre, both based in London. She specialised at DasArts (Amsterdam School of the Arts), combining theoretical and hands-on knowledge on the relationship between body and technology. She now works as an autonomous artist and director of interactive, performative installations that research our embodied relationship with the world. Marloeke is currently affiliated with HKU University of the Arts Utrecht as a tutor, and with HKU Research Centre Performative Processes as a researcher. In 2015, she published the book *Performance as*

*Interface|Interface as Performance*: a personal reflection on six years of artistic practice, in which she explores her life in a technology-driven, networked world and its impact on the body.

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## **Research**

For my current artistic research I am exploring the tactile sense and its potential role in generating an experience that focuses on the reciprocal relationship between humans and other materialities. The sculptural objects depicted on these pages are part of this research. They are meant to evoke a desire with the audience to experience the perceptual sensation of touching them, either imaginatively or for real. The object may activate for instance the ‘haptic gaze’,<sup>iv</sup> meaning just caressing the surface and shape of the material with the eye already activates the sensation of touching.

When this desire is aroused, a first encounter between body and object is achieved. However, to extend this event in a non-hierarchical manner, their joint agency, as a confederation of human and nonhuman elements, is required and needs to be taken seriously. The engagement of both objects and audience / participants is necessary to explore their reciprocal relation over time.

Haptic exploration is our intentional, physical interaction with the world around us and comprises activating the tactile, proprioceptive and kinaesthetic senses. The physical sensation of touch is identified by the tactile receptors in our skin perceiving pressure, pain, temperature and texture. Proprioceptors are sensors in our joints, muscles, and fascia that we need in order to produce coordinated movement for grabbing an object. We use our kinaesthetic awareness (also called proprioception) - the awareness of how we move - to bring the object close to one’s skin. To interact with these objects, haptic exploration turns out to be necessary to reveal all their embedded secrets.

## **Process**

As I research in and through my art practice, I investigate how my experience of the haptic exploration of sculptural materials and crafting techniques influences **my aesthetic choices** during the creative process.

I assembled a *list of distinctive qualities* of haptic exploration that made me focus on the reciprocal nature of touching materialities:

1. Touching takes - and needs - time. It slows you down. Unlike seeing, which can comprise vast surroundings in one glance, it is impossible to touch and immediately grasp even the tiniest object.

2. Touching is movement, allowing the object to play an active dimension in the process.

As such both object and subject influence the temporality of the touching itself, which resembles reading a text or listening to a melody. How fast or slow, how many times, how short or long one touches is in direct correlation with the texture, layering, shape, volume, temperature, weight, etcetera of the material or object.

3. Haptic exploration subverts our usual optic-spatial organisation with its fixed and exterior point of view and its linear coordinates, and evokes an internal personal spatial experience. When I solely focus on the (in)direct haptic exploration of an object, material or space, I cannot position myself at the outside, perceiving the object, material or space from a distance. My spatial experience is formed over time through the sensation of touching, step-by-step. As a result I lose my rational sense of orientation, and conception of nearby, faraway and depth and enter an intuitive space without beginning or ending.

These observations led me to concentrate on working with materials and techniques that are physically demanding, partly unpredictable and require me to train my tactile sensibility. Moreover, I realised that the process of creation and transformation of the material needs to remain visible in the final shapes: presenting traces and marks that reveal the previous tactile interaction between the materialities.

I decided to knot and tie-dye silk cloths, knit electricity wire and use it for capacitive sensing, burn, cut and sew synthetic fabrics and use these as molds for plaster, mix and pour urethane foams on various surfaces. Especially these foams became very interesting to me as their creation processes never become completely

controllable and predictable: it is partly an invisible chemical process that creates the final shape.

These tactile creation processes forced me to take the ‘vitality of materialities’, such as the material and tools I am using, my arms and hands that act, the space I am working in, very seriously. With the word ‘vitality’ Jane Bennett points to: ‘The capacity of things to not only impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’.<sup>v</sup>

I realised that especially *during* the preparation phase, while handling, molding the material, my haptic exploration becomes a proper dialogue with the material, as it acts as much as a companion as it is resistant.

My haptic exploration within the creative process demands focus and engagement and reveals the reciprocal nature of my interaction with materialities; I cannot touch without being touched in turn, as philosopher Erin Manning emphasised.<sup>vi</sup> As a result my haptic exploration transcends the sort of interaction in which subject and object are seen as two separate unities and facilitates what feminist theorist Karen Barad calls ‘intra-action’,<sup>vii</sup> where object and subject become fluid and are constantly changing in the moment.

Going back to my practice, in the moments when I truly submit myself to haptic exploration - getting into a physical, tactile dialogue with the object, materials or persons - I experience an opening up of an intuitive space, a mental space without preconceptions or clear intentions. It is a space where my (affective, emotional, mental) responses are constantly changing as a result of being in direct interaction with the ‘who or what’ I am touching. It is challenging to stay in this place of the unknown and letting the materialities exert their power. Especially since touching is never symmetrical: a friendly tap can become derogative or even damaging to another (non)human being. In addition, one can never fully predict how the dialogue will develop. But when I manage to do so, other creative possibilities open up, possibilities that are *not solely* initiated by me, and a “new” understanding of myself in relation to the object, the material or the other *does* appear.

## Motivation

My artistic goal is to create awareness for our ongoing reciprocal relation with the world. To accomplish this goal, I research what artistic strategies that activate the tactile sense, evoke a sensorial experience of entanglement<sup>viii</sup> with (non)human beings, as I believe this can stimulate the creation of a new understanding of oneself.

Why focusing on the tactile sense? Although touch plays a crucial role in nearly all of our sensory experiences<sup>ix</sup>, there is little theory that describes touch in relation to art, referring to the experience as well as to the objects and looking into the making processes of and connections in between artists, art and beholders. This stems with the tradition of modern arts, still giving the visual sense priority, as the general, optical museum clearly shows; objects are neatly put behind glass or the audience is asked to keep at safe distance from the objects on display. However by limiting ourselves to eyes and ears we belittle our complex perceptive faculties.

The question is how the activation of the tactile sense influences the experience of interacting with materialities. A pressing question while at this moment in time the overall tendency is to touch less or not at all. Due to the worldwide Covid 19 crisis tactile interaction with materialities is regarded as a serious health treat. And already

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<sup>viii</sup> I refer here to the definition given by Barad: “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence.” Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Duke University Press.

<sup>ix</sup> A feature noted by Gibson, J.J., 1966, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

before the pandemic started, social, cultural and political norms for touch(ing) each other varied and created a lot of uncertainty (#MeToo). We now experience what it entails to be completely deprived of tactile interaction and it's commonly agreed that it's a fundamental need for all living beings. As we can't go back to the old paradigm, we need to find new models and rituals to reevaluate and reconsider the values of tactile interaction with the world. The artistic arenas (museums, theaters, cultural spaces) could then become the locations to experiment with this sense and become explorative spaces, not aimed at resolution but at intuitive engagement, from sites of authority to sites of mutuality.

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<sup>i</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter*. Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Bruno Latour distributes agentic capacity also to the event: "There are events. I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do. That which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change, and to bifurcate." In: Bennett, p. 103.

<sup>iii</sup> Bennett, p. 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts*. University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>v</sup> Bennett, p. 8.

<sup>vi</sup> Manning, Erin. *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

<sup>vii</sup> Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801-831.