

Reflections on bodies in lockdown: The polyphony of touch

Multimodality & Society

2021, Vol. 1(1) 81–87

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DOI: 10.1177/2634979521992275

journals.sagepub.com/home/mas**Marloeke van der Vlugt***HKU University of the Arts Utrecht, The Netherlands***Keywords**

Affect, art, body, embodied modes, interaction, materiality, sensory, visual, tactile, performance

The following text can be read as a description of my practice-as-research that investigates artistic strategies that activate the sense of touch. As I examine, through my body, how to evoke the bodily involvement of the participant/public either via actual, physical interaction or via the internal, sensorimotor experience of touch(ing), I focus on the component ‘presence’ (Gumbrecht, 2004) within the aesthetic experience.

The text is written to offer insight on the perspectives that influence my studio practice: a search for tactile sensations, an embodied knowledge of previous works, my study of literature and theory, and feedback from public presentations. Perspectives that are situated within a dynamic, everchanging world. In a continuous search to represent the many voices (Christophe, 2018), enacted in tactile interaction with bodies, organisms, objects and materials, I alternate between the viewpoints of:

Artist/performer,

Researcher,

Participant,

each deeply integrated and moving between private and public experiences and explanations.

‘Touching’ within my practice-as-research refers to haptic exploration.

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Haptic exploration 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 for producing 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.

Omnipresent touching is suddenly regarded as dangerous, extremely related to our vulnerability, as even air may carry the virus. It has a profound impact on my practice that already functioned in a precarious time considering touch practices.

Interactive artistic works are challenging to exhibit in museums and theatres while the audience is not used to physically interacting with the works, and there is little know-how on how to present and maintain these works. 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.

Social practices around touching are often unclear, ambiguous (#MeToo) and create uncertainty.

Technological developments around haptics accentuate quick, efficient communication over distance via touch screens.

Notebook: The peri-personal space now feels restrictive. I am not able to reach out, afraid of trespassing the 1,5 metres border that is drawn around me.

Communicating with the world outside my studio becomes exhausting as my physical body revolts with stiffness and vertigo against the long video conferencing – Zoom – marathons.

Collectively working on mobile devices, I need to become available the whole day through. Constant surveillance, 24 hours a day, no place to hide.

Time slows down and becomes circular, an infinity of again and again and again.

Every moment appears to be similar; I start to forget what day it is. Concentration is hard; my body starts a task, my mind wanders off to unsettling news feeds.

Being online all day evokes a state of potentiality: availability leads to an ongoing, restless feeling of anticipation, expectation and hope – then if nothing happens, it feels as if I am left in the waiting room.

Looking at my face in the Zoom window, I start to experience myself through the eyes of the other person. I develop a disconnected relationship with myself – I perform the role I believe is the most suitable for the occasion.

Through these screens we detach from our physicality in order to represent our thoughts. Thoughts get restricted as they can only be translated in words, not in gestures, movements, energy etcetera. On the other side of the screen, people only perceive this digital representation, allowing for many misinterpretations, as our sensory perception of less visible (political) behaviour is limited.

I perceive my digital body as plural, scattered, all over the place; I present myself as a picture on social media, as text in WhatsApp, as a speaking character in Zoom. As the present is cut into slices, I disappear in the cracks.

Is there a way to restore the balance between the haptic and the optical via the screen?

How to evoke the imagination to gather the physicality of a felt sensing?

I wondered if it would be possible to digitally share the experience of *do-ing* Bandhani and evoke the grounding, physical sensations regarding time and space, triggered by my heightened awareness of concentrated movements executed over a period of time.

Bandhani is a type of tie-dye textile which is made by tightly tying cloth into many small knots that form a pattern (Figure 1(a) and (b)). The cloth is then dyed, the tying thread is removed, which leaves a circular design on the cloth (Figure 1(c)).



Figure 1. (a to c) The Bandhani process.

The name Bandhani is derived from the Sanskrit word *banda*, to tie. I chose this 5000-year-old technique, because it is a delicate way to create patterns. It is like a very precise but simple choreography performed by the hands: pinching the cloth, binding many tiny knots, waiting and then opening them up, like a long line of little stories. Every knot is unique, with its own aesthetic appeal: the craftswomen each have their own specific ‘handwriting’: big knots, small ones with a hole in the middle, squares, knots tied really close to each other, and so on. The structure invites touching with the tips of the fingers, like reading a story written in braille on a piece of paper.

I had to really ‘listen’ to the material. The material guided my fingers.

Touching is movement, it allows the object to play an active role in the process.

The knotting evoked a heightened awareness of the *alternation* of tactual touch (the active exploratory action of touching) and tactile touch (passive touch, like being touched through the stimulation of skin by the material). This alternation of active and passive touches and the evoked diversity in qualities of touches (hard, soft, sharp, short, long) made it an immersive experience and ignited my body to *perform* a range of physical sensations combined with emotions, memories and imaginations.

Touching evokes engagement. It has the capacity of transcending the sort of interaction in which subject and object are seen as two separate entities. It facilitates what theorist Karen Barad (2003) calls 'intra-action' where knowledge is fluid and constantly changing in the moment. As we handle the object for the first time, the thoughts that are acted out arise in a complex collaboration between the object itself, the situation, and the performative moment. As this moment begins to act through us and experience emerges, we can in turn be changed into owners of new thought.

I experienced that the inner sensation of moving my body in time and space became highly influenced by the action itself and the materials, especially the size of the cloth.

Touching takes – and needs – time. It slows down. Unlike seeing that may comprise vast surroundings in one glance, it is impossible to touch and immediately grasp the tiniest object.

The macro space around me disappears, as the experiential peri-personal space surrounding my body takes over. To make little knots close to each other, I need to bend over, bringing the silk close to my eyes, making micro movements with my fingers. These movements evoke the sensation of being trapped in a small narrow and low corridor, or later, when I drape it over my body in order to work with it, these movements expand my sensation of space, giving it a vast, infinite quality.

Haptic perception subverts our usual optic-spatial organization with its fixed and exterior point of view and its linear coordinates, and may evoke an internal personal spatial experience.

My full attention hyper focused on the haptic interaction with the cloth, the formal yet flexible qualities of the material make me aware of the relationality of our experiences and the performative qualities of the tactile sense.

Touch – both the act of touching and being touched – can be regarded as an opening up or narrowing down of the 'space-in-between'. This concept is actually a metaphor based on formal knowledge, because in reality we are – as science has shown us – unable to touch someone or something. Zooming in to a microscopic level, we see that atoms are not able to touch each other, there is no actual contact involved. What we sense is the electromagnetic repulsion between the electrons of the atoms that make up our fingers and of that which you seek to touch. All we ever feel is this electromagnetic force: negatively charged particles pushing each other away. 'Repulsion at the core of attraction' (Barad, 2012). In other words, touch(ing) can be experienced as an open space-in-between, a fluid, *queer* space, oscillating between that by its very nature cannot be closed, formalized or fixed.

How to draw attention to and critically research the creative and transformational potential of this space-in-between that manifests itself to

me as an ‘aesthetic experience in a process of oscillation between flow and reflection, between absorption in the interaction and distanced self-perception, and between cathartic transformation and cognitive judgment’ (Kwastek, 2015)?

When I slowly wander my eyes over a piece of Bandhani, I also experience an experiential and sensorial space that starts to enfold, no beginning, nor ending, only the continuous following the contours, the lines and marks of the object. I try to ‘read’ the semiotic references, relive memories of physical labour, activate earlier sensual encounters of body and silk, and become aware of the vitality of my body as I recognize and identify with these qualities in the material.

In response to Covid-19 I understand that this imaginary experience has become more urgent to explore: tactile experiences that may be triggered through the visual and aural senses and evoke bodily involvement.

To research these experiences, I build on two concepts. The first is the concept of ‘transomatization’ (Esrock, 2003) which refers to how the viewer reinterprets a part or process of their bodies as a stand-in for something outside of the self. For instance a slow heartbeat for the dripping of paint, resulting in an overlap being created between the self and the object. The second concept is the ‘haptic gaze’, (Sobchack, 2004) in which caressing the surface and shape of the material with the eye activates the sensation of touching. This concept is also explored by media theorist Laura Marks who describes this kind of looking: ‘when my gaze is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze’ (Marks cited in Munteaîn, 2018).

These concepts prompt me to investigate what senses and what parts of my body react to the visual, aural and/or tactual stimuli? When do I experience a spatial relationship with the object? And how? Through the sensation of proximity? Or via the sensation of texture? Provoking me to collect, assemble and reflect on my sensory vocabularies and descriptions of the human body and materialities, as I search for an explorative and expressive language or, as Bennett (2020) calls it, a process-forward grammar, that seeks to overcome the demarcation between activity and passivity and that helps to induce an ‘I, in process’.

As a first step I made a video sketch<embed link <https://vimeo.com/489470663>> in which I use short, textual assignments and foam objects as the main ingredients.

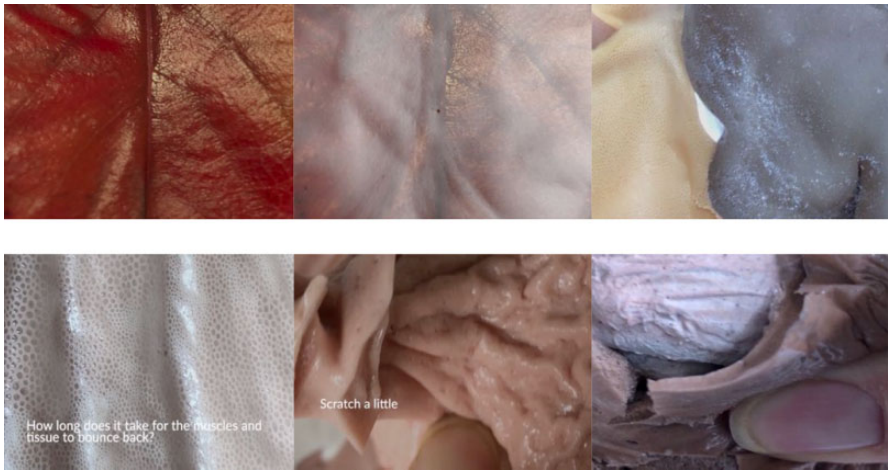


Figure 2. Still images from the video sketch '(Re)visiting the Tactile Sense'.

Have a look. Feel. Is it possible to elicit a sense of material embodied relationality through the digital screen? Can artistic artefacts evoke a detached touch in a sensorial manner that may fill the desire for concrete, tangible engagement with worldly transformations?

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author biography

Marloeke van der Vlugt is an artist/researcher with a background in performance and scenography. Her research explores Touch(ing); the (in)direct activation and relationality of our inner and outer tactile sensations, and investigates – in and through her artistic practice – manners to enact and (re)present the many perspectives/voices that are performed during our reciprocal, tactile interaction with the world.

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