

Slide 1: This talk will be about my artistic research on:

Activating and Exploring the Tactile Sense
within Artistic Creation and Communication Strategies.

Before I begin, I want to elaborate on the concepts used in this sentence:

Slide 2: With the first sentence 'activating and exploring the tactile sense' I refer to haptic exploration being our intentional - physical - reciprocal interaction with the world around.

Slide 3: As such this 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.

Together these senses constitute one's basic and fundamental engagement with an object and as Professor of museum anthropology Sandra Dudley remarks; "...it is the experiential step in our engagement with an object that is so fundamental and so basic, that it is often missed in exploration of our ... responses to objects"¹.

As these responses are strongly influenced by who we are and the prior knowledge, experiences, feelings and so on we incorporate, my aim with this step in my artistic research is not to create tactile works evoking a specific meaning or that trigger certain categories of sensations. At this point, I am interested in exploring how my artistic work can activate the tactile sense, and how touching can contribute to new ways of understanding, or of not-knowing.

Slide 4: With Artistic Creation and Communication Strategies I refer to my intention to unravel how a dialogue can be constituted between human and non-human actors within the tactile encounter.

This dialogue can take place both during the production as during the sharing of the artistic works, which can also be one and the same, as I concentrate on artistic practices that are interactive and/or relational, including my own, and as such need an audience to be activated or performed.

¹ In: Dudley, S. (ed.)(2012) *Museum Objects, encountering the Properties of Things*, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Activating and Exploring the Tactile Sense
within Artistic Creation and Communication Strategies.

Slide 5: Bit of an overview of what will I talk about –

1. What is at stake?

Looking at our present-day technology based communication.

Looking at the history of art.

2. Strategies to activate and explore the tactile sense within artistic creation and communication processes.

1. What is at stake?

Looking at our present-day technology based communication.

Let's start with the first one.

Seen from the position of my artistic work...

Slide 6: I create interactive, performative installations that situate themselves at the crossroads of performance, scenography and media arts.

Slide 7: My work explores what it means to live in a technology driven, networked society and its impact on the body.

Slide 8: The concepts behind the installations part from my personal fascination with hybrid forms of communication – as you see here, the participants could wear the chair or knitted jumper with sensors, triggering audiofiles and influencing the movements of the parachutes and the other way around.

Slide 9: I experienced that the body, more specific the tactile sense, is neglected in the kind of communication set up by mouse, keyboard and screens
Leading / This led to a corporeal sensation of fluidity and fragmentation
and concerns about agency, individuality and engagement.

Slide 10: as I describe in my book *Performance as Interface*².

Slide 11 With the works I enabled an audience to critically dissect their own communication by making them into the performers of the pieces (using wearables that lead the focus back to the body).

Here you see Series Patchmaker, I was wearing the sensor suit and the audience was invited to touch or move me in order to set up a dialogue.

² Idem, pag 20

Slide 12: I needed to lure the audience into engaging with the artwork by obliging them to touch, otherwise the work was not activated.

Slide 13: As such the haptic exploration of the participants triggered and manipulated a digital archive consisting of audio and videofiles that I had selected, as such the potential impact of the tactile dialogue and its own, experiential 'meaning' was overshadowed by the narrative and my intentions behind the work.

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Considering our every day use of touchscreens and sensors the interaction in these installations was still quite open, or at least choices could be made. Our everyday technologies don't at all invite the user to explore the reciprocal nature of touching; (as a user, you just have to apprehend how to 'touch' the button/sensor in the 'right' manner in order for the communication with the 'other' to develop). It is simply not required to express oneself in the manner of touching the device, nor do we expect any response other than the functional outcome.

In our social lives however we *are all still* confronted with the fact that touch(ing) is reciprocal and a-symmetrical as you can never be sure what triggers the other persons' response. While cultural and political norms for touch(ing) each other are varying this seems to create a lot of uncertainty. As a result we might want to touch less and by limiting ourselves to eyes and ears belittle our complex perceptive faculties.

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1. What is at stake?

Looking at the history of art.

Slide 16 Again starting from my artistic practice I experience to put these kind of works into museums and theatres is still a challenge while the audience is not used to physically interact 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.

Slide 17 However, for artists and art institutions of the 21st century this seems to be changing while in today's art, mostly due to the developments in technology, the sense of touch plays a more important role than ever.

Recent exhibition designs attempt to open up their showcases as the results of museum research emphasizes the imaginative, affectual engagement of the visitor's touch to "animate the past, the object and, by implication the visitor"³.

Slide 18 However, it still seems like the tactile sense is not considered to be as influential as the other senses concerning the aesthetic process, (while the impact of the act of touch(ing) on our affective perception and emotions or its possibilities for (more inclusive) communication is seldom critically addressed or explored.)

There is little theory that describes touch in relation to art, referring to the experience

³ Jewitt, C., Price, S. (2019) "Family touch practices and learning experiences in the museum" *The Senses and Society*, 14:2, p. 221-235

as well as to the objects and looking into the making processes of and connections in between artists, art and beholders. This absence of discourse and the still dominant code of art spaces 'not to touch' the art seems to withhold both maker and visitor to regard the act of touching itself as potentially creative, poetic and imaginative within an aesthetic experience.

As I see it reasons for **assembling a** living archive consisting of a series of tactile relational artworks that induce an audience to engage in haptic exploration and articulate what the interesting qualities could be.

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2. Strategies to activate and explore the tactile sense within artistic creation and communication processes.

As I research through my art practice I started to investigate what role the tactile sense plays **in relation to my aesthetic choices** within my **creative** processes.

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One of my crafts is based on a type of tie-dye textile, which is called Bandhani. This craft is like performing a very precise but simple choreography of the hands: pinching the cloth, binding the many tiny knots, waiting and then unraveling them. I use conductive threads to make the knots enabling the cloth to trigger digital files when touched.

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I also work with other conductive materials, like knitting electric wire as I felt that these threads connect both fear and intimacy in relation to touch. Fear that is related to touching anything that has current running through it and intimacy that is triggered by the physical act of knitting, and the homely qualities knitted surfaces still evoke.

In the first public experiments I did, the objects were still triggering digital audio and video files, and as such still leading the focus away from the actual haptic exploration itself.

I realized 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, in other words the material has something to 'say' as well. It becomes clear that it is not only me, as a human being, who decides what the outcome will be.

My intentional haptic exploration within the creative process implies engagement, as philosopher Erin Manning emphasised: "I cannot touch without being touched in turn"⁴. As such haptic exploration may transcend the sort of interaction in which subject and object are seen as two separate unities and facilitates what theorist Barad⁵ calls 'intra action' where knowledge is fluid and 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 dialogue with the object, the material or with

⁴ Manning, E. (2007), *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007

⁵ Barad, K. (2003) "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), pp. 801-831.

another person as in the performance installation Series Patchmaker,

I experience an opening up of an intuitive space, a fluid mental space, without preconceptions or clear intentions

(As described by Barad): 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 object, material, the other' exerts his power. Especially while touching is never symmetrical and one can never fully predict how the dialogue will develop. But when I manage, a 'new' understanding of myself in relation to the object, the material or the other *does* appear.

The question is: how to draw attention to the potential creative possibilities of this 'space-in-between' that exists within and is given shape through the act of touching? When is haptic exploration experienced as an open invitation into a visceral space to move within and to actively explore?

This is where artistic strategies – historic and new ones - need to be explored [and articulated](#).

In my historical research I focus on the following artists:

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1. Futurist Marinetti, spoke about the art of touch that he called tactilism. Tactile boards – Sudan Paris – they were passed around the audience and were meant as a vertical, linear narrative representing traveling from Sudan, the sea and Paris. He believed through tactility the audience could attain true sincerity.
2. Lygia Clark developed through her career a conception of art as an activity that focuses on the modification of the spectator. Started with a group of participants, slowly became a more therapeutic exchange in between client and herself. Her relational objects were meant to stimulate the patient to let his or her imaginations flow, emphasizing the objects touching the body and the reaction to them, aiming for the relational object to flash out traumatic experiences.
3. Svankmeijer avant-garde Czech theatre designer, artist, filmmaker, promoted tactile sensibility as an unlikely political weapon that slips under the radar of the state, more concerned with audiovisual mass media. He sought to demonstrate that tactile experience restores access to irrational thought, emotion and perception.

Inspired by these works I started to explore other materials like urethane pouring foams as I wanted to elaborate on the dialogue with materials; working with urethane pouring foams is never fully predictable; it's partly an invisible chemical process that creates the final shape.

Sharing these works with an audience I noted a *few distinctive qualities* that are present in haptic exploration

1. Touching takes - and needs - time. It slows you down. Unlike seeing that may comprise vast surroundings in one glance, it is impossible to touch and immediately grasp the tiniest object.
2. Touching is movement, allowing the object to play an active dimension in the process.
3. There is an intrinsic temporality, a partition of time, in the haptic perception of an object, which resembles reading a tekst or listening to a melody.

4. 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.

To finish off I will give a first description of the artistic strategies I found for activating haptic exploration with an audience.

1. The process of creation and transformation needs to become experienceable in the interaction between audience and objects for tactility to become effective not only in composition but also in consumption. For instance through letting the objects have an unfinished quality, presenting traces and marks that reveal the process and a fabricator.

2. Both watching and experiencing touch(ing) can mobilize tactile imagination by invoking relevant memories and associations related to that particular kind of touch or that particular thing now touched⁶.

To focus on haptic exploration it is not needed to shut off the other senses. I found that when blindfolded the focus went to the functional qualities of the object, what is it, what is it for.

The other senses can help to intensify the dialogue with the object as the object may activate for instance the Tactile eye⁷, meaning just watching the (shape of the) material already activates the sensation of touching.

3. To activate a tactile 'dialogue' I use materials and techniques that implicate 'vitality' and have a 'dynamic form'⁸.

They have an embedded reciprocal character as they 'respond' to being touched and are touching back in an unpredictable manner.

As a result the objects require haptic exploration, as this is indispensable for effective decoding and mobilizing imagination: to get to 'know' the object, only seeing is not enough. It's not possible to predict how the backside looks, without turning it around, to understand what is inside without pressing it or to sense its temperature nor predict its weight without picking it up.

4. In order for the audience to take time and explore the 'space-in-between' - the objects need to respond to and as such lengthen and intensify the haptic exploration, making it into a dialogue.

To achieve this the material should react to skin-to-skin contact, either through changing its shape, through its conductive properties that trigger audio files or through embedded soft electronics that change the temperature of the material or execute vibration.

That's it for now – I will continue to explore and articulate these strategies by creating and developing objects for the living archive and presenting them at different spaces and various audiences.

I hope you will take the time to explore the objects on display.

⁶ Hossain, M.S. (2016) Towards tactile reading" in: *Anekaant: A Journal of Polysemic Thought*, presentation on the XIX International Conference on Materialities: Objects, Matters, Things, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

⁷ Sobchack, V. (2004) *Carnal Thoughts*, University of California Press, London, England

⁸ Massumi, Brian (2008) "The Thinking-Feeling of what happens: a Semblance of a conversation" published in *Inflexions Online Journal*.

Just one concluding remark: as we move toward a non-anthropocentric perspective, the revaluation of tactile interaction with the world around could lead us to 'other ways of understanding' while it lets us explore the relationship with oneself, with other (human and non-human) bodies, and with the environment. While in the process of encounter, in the engagement between object and subject, sensory responses, emotions and ideas are generated that may open up new and creative approaches to understanding people and things.

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.