

Touch¹

Verb

- come so close to (an object) as to be or come into contact with it.
 - bring one's hand or another part of one's body into contact with.
 - come or bring into mutual contact.
 - be tangent to (a curve or surface) at a certain point.
- handle in order to manipulate, alter, or otherwise affect, especially in an adverse way.
 - cause harm to (someone).
 - consume or use (food, drink, money, etc.).
 - used to indicate that something is avoided or rejected.
- have an effect on; make a difference to.
 - (of a quality or expression) be or become visible or apparent in.
- produce feelings of affection, gratitude, or sympathy in.
- reach (a specified level or amount).
 - be comparable to in quality or excellence.
- lightly mark in features or other details with a brush or pencil.

Noun

- an act of touching someone or something.
 - the faculty of perception through physical contact, especially with the fingers.
 - a musician's manner of playing keys or strings.
 - the manner in which a musical instrument's keys or strings respond to being played.
 - a light stroke with a pen, pencil, etc.
- a small amount; a trace.
 - a detail or feature, typically one that gives something a distinctive character.
- a distinctive manner or method of dealing with something.
 - an ability to deal with something successfully.

¹ Excerpts of definitions from *Oxford Languages*. "Touch," Lexico.com, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/touch>.

Partial Touch

Part I

I have been thinking a lot about touch lately—touching surfaces and objects, touching other people, touching the world. Within a few months, all of these actions have become stigmatized as they form ways through which the coronavirus can be transmitted. When outside the house, I keep reminding myself not to touch anything or anyone unless I absolutely have to. When mail and packages arrive, I quarantine them a few days before touching them. And, of course, I try (and fail) not to touch my face. Far from being the “forgotten sense,” touch is now foregrounded as something to be scrutinized and, if possible, avoided.²

I have also been thinking a lot about touch due to an ongoing project I began about five years ago and which involves recreating books from my late grandmother Koralia’s book collection. Most of these are 19th and early 20th-century school books that belonged to my grandmother, grandfather, great-uncle and great-grandfather. I “re-read” each book as a material object rather than a text, focusing on marks of usage and time: folds, creases, tears, stains, discolorations, and wormholes. For each book, I trace around these marks by hand, one page at a time, and then scan, print, and bind the drawings into a new book containing only the excavated marks. The recreated books become archives of lines—lines that suggest narratives of time, touch, embodiment, and distributed agency. I think of the recreated books as alternative “history” books, recording the history of handling of each original book, including the history of my own handling of that same book.

This project, with its focus on touch and the accumulation of traces, has acquired an unexpected resonance during the pandemic. Touched surfaces physically connect us to one another— “[t]he surface that one person touches bears the trace of that person, hosts and transfers that trace, and affects the next person whose touch lands there.”³ Traveling people touch surfaces in the spaces they encounter, inadvertently depositing their traces and picking up the traces of others. Traveling objects move from person to person, carrying traces of each hand and, potentially, traces of the virus. We are all interconnected, most often in unequal ways.⁴ And we all leave our marks/traces in the world that we all share. The books I started making years ago present such shared and touched surfaces. They make visible the traces of each body—both human and non-human—that touched each page, while also reminding me of the invisible yet potentially deadly traces of the virus. They also remind me that we, as embodied beings, partially come to know the world through touching—we feel the world.

Some of these books will be shown as part of a postponed group exhibition in September. Initially—pre-pandemic—they would have been placed on a low custom-built bench. Visitors would have been able to lean down, take a book, and “read” it—handle it in the way a book is meant to be handled and, in the process, potentially add their own imperceptible traces to the ones already recorded. According to new health and safety protocols, however, objects in art exhibitions can no longer be handled by viewers. I have thus spent the past month talking with the curators and rethinking the work and its display. The inaccessibility of the books at this specific moment in time foregrounds once again touch, or rather its interruption and partial loss. Things meant to be handled and touched are now beyond our reach.

Part II

During my daily walks around Boulder, I have begun noticing more and more chalk drawings—along with leftover chinks—on the pavements around my neighborhood, most likely the

² Pablo Maurette uses the phrase “the forgotten sense” as the title of his book on touch. Pablo Maurette, *The Forgotten Sense: Meditations on Touch* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

³ Judith Butler, “Human Traces on the Surfaces of the World,” in *[ConTactos]*, eds. Diana Taylor and Marcial Godoy-Anativia (New York, NY: HemiPress, 2020), <https://contactos.tome.press/human-traces-on-the-surfaces-of-the-world/>.

⁴ See Butler, “Human Traces on the Surfaces of the World.”

result of parents trying to keep their children entertained during the shelter-in-place orders. I have thus far encountered a dragon with a very long body, an aquarium of brightly colored fish, gardens with flowers of all sorts, and encouraging messages: “You are not alone,” “We can do hard things,” “Add your own drawing.” Some of the drawings are traces of sidewalk games played—hopscotch courses for the most part—and inadvertently invite passers-by to pause their walk and play. These marks intervene in my route, asking me to consider different possibilities for my movement through space.

One of the things that pulls me towards the action of drawing is its ability to simply and literally embody an encounter through touch. When a marking tool touches a surface it leaves behind a mark. That mark acts as the trace of the encounter between tool and surface, between the hand that holds the tool and the surface that is being touched, between the person drawing and the object they draw on, between person and world. Through drawing, we touch and leave traces in the world. I never see the people that made those chalk drawings; even if I do see them, I have to keep my distance from them. I see their traces though; I witness the way they have touched their surroundings. And these traces affect me—touch me—in potentially more significant ways than before. They remind me of a shared physical space that the pandemic partially took away (while also bringing it to the foreground); they become an affirmation of a shared experience.

Lately, and perhaps not surprisingly, I have been reading many articles and following discussions that attempt to think through the role of art during times of crises.⁵ “If art is a reflection of who we are, of what is meaningful, what we value and of our principles,”⁶ then it can become a method of reflecting on and coping with the present. Indeed, I have experienced works of art that reflect on a current situation, which reframe an everyday occurrence such that it becomes surprising and the viewer can consider it anew. But I have also experienced works of art that imagine a different future. Art is not only a reflection of who we are and of the present world around us; it is also a reflection on who we *want* to become and of the future we want to generate. This is where its transformational power lies (and, yes, I am a hopeful idealist with a vivid imagination). Art can help generate the future, it can *touch* the world, providing openings towards different futures. It can also touch its audience, changing it in the process—“[t]here is no work of art that does not call on a people who does not yet exist.”⁷ Ultimately, artistic practice is one of the methods we have to reimagine the world.

Of course, art and artistic practice do not exist in a vacuum. The only way to fully address the role of art is by including art institutions and structures in the discussion, thinking through the role of museums, galleries, art schools, funding agencies, and whatever structures are in place (or not) to support artists. The pandemic has accentuated issues relating to accessibility and dissemination to an unprecedented degree. Galleries and museums have closed, hopefully only temporarily, exhibitions got postponed or cancelled, future exhibitions will be by appointment only, exhibited objects meant to be handled must now not be touched. With safety measures still in place for indefinite periods of time and with people encouraged to stay at home as much as possible, modes of dissemination need to be rethought.

⁵ See, for example:

Christopher Bailey, Mona Chalabi, Anne Pasternak, Jerry Saltz, “Art in the Time of Coronavirus: The Future is Unwritten - A UN75 Moderated Dialogue (Livestream),” UN75, April 22, 2020, video, 1:51:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlWkLiS5mm0>.

Sam Ramos, “What Relevance Can Art Have for Frontline Providers Right Now?” Hyperallergic, April 20, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/556351/what-relevance-can-art-have-for-frontline-providers-right-now/>.

Carmen Salas, “What Should We Expect from Art in the Next Few Years/Decades? And What is Art, Anyway?” Medium, May 8, 2020, <https://medium.com/@CarmenSP/what-should-we-expect-from-art-in-the-next-few-years-decades-and-what-is-art-anyway-be9f75c3d1ae>.

⁶ Salas, “What Should We Expect from Art in the Next Few Years/Decades? And What is Art, Anyway?”

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “What is the Creative Act?” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2007), 329.

Part III

I am still trying to decide how to install the books for that exhibition that got postponed. My current plan is to have the books open under a glass case (no chance of touching whatsoever) and to provide a link for the viewers to access a digital version of each book. Viewers will be able to use their cell phone, a device many will have on them, to “read” through the books, swiping through the virtual pages, touching a screen rather than paper. The intimacy of turning the pages of a book will be performed through digital swiping. Perhaps this will accentuate the longing to touch the actual books. Perhaps it will fulfil the need to touch, albeit in a different way, since the viewers’ hands will still be involved—the digital, after all, is rooted in the digitus, the finger. Perhaps it will bring together closeness and distance, the physical and the virtual, suggesting a hybrid approach to how we touch and are touched. And perhaps it will draw attention to touch as an ongoing relational process, one that is neither neutral nor passive; one that necessitates attentiveness and responsibility.

Over the past eight weeks, I have come to see *D-S* as another instance of touching. Twenty-four artists have constructed three chains of eight, each artist in the chain selecting/touching the next one, presumably an artist that has touched them in turn. In addition, each artist is responsible for the materials they present, not finished works but materials that form part of their research—found images, videos and text, sketches or preliminary thoughts, documentation photographs. Things that form part of each artist’s space, the space that exists before, below, and around whatever projects they end up “completing” and sharing in the future. And, of course, the other artists in the chain also form part of that space. Moreover, each additional artist’s materials provide a different lens through which to see all previous artists’ materials. This interweaving shifts the emphasis from the individual to the collective, from the solitary to the collaborative, and from “finished” works to thoughts-in-process. What I see emerging are communities of making and, yes, touching, but touching as an ongoing process—a process of connecting, constructing, adjusting, experiencing, engaging.

We always physically touch something—with different parts of our body—and we are always touched in turn. That cannot change. But our approach to touching can. I wonder what might happen if we become more aware of the networks of touching we are involved in, from the smallest and simplest to the biggest and most complex, from the literal to the metaphorical. What if we become more attentive to all the ways through which we touch, and not only through fear of getting sick but through acknowledging that what and how we touch matters? Materials with our hands, spaces with our bodies and actions, people with our bodies, actions, words or works, the world with our everyday choices... Lovingly, violently, forcefully, lightly, timidly, intimately...

Marina Kassianidou is a visual artist who lives and works between Boulder, Colorado, USA, and Limassol, Cyprus. She works within painting, drawing, collage, installation, and art writing, focusing on processes of marking. Through her practice, Kassianidou approaches the act of marking a surface/space as a way of relating to others and to our surroundings. Specifically, she examines modes of relating to the world that do not involve imposing our presence but rather becoming attentive to what is already there, responding to it, and finding ways of working with it.

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