



Thresholds of Touch

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We are in a crisis of touch, prompting a need to reconsider and revalue our tactile behavior and the reciprocity of touching (Kearney, 2021). This crisis provided a starting point for Thresholds of Touch, the performance experiment that underpins this video article. Thresholds was devised through a two-year interdisciplinary collaboration between the authors – an artist/researcher, social researcher, and sound composer/researcher. The performance experiment was scripted and choreographed to carefully explore the reciprocity of physical touching with others, the self, the environment, and objects as a 'tactile preparation chamber' to sensitize and activate people to share and document their touch experiences. This video article uses artistic embodied strategies to engage with and reflect on the participants experiences of Thresholds. Through our layering, re-enactment and live-tracing of participants visual and written responses to Thresholds, and our spoken and written reflections we create an analytical dialogue with the performance. The video article proposes these methods as an invitation to the viewer to move and touch through this dialogue as a route to newly research and attune to touch.

Keywords: embodied research; performance experiment; care; interactivity; scenography; artistic research; response-ability

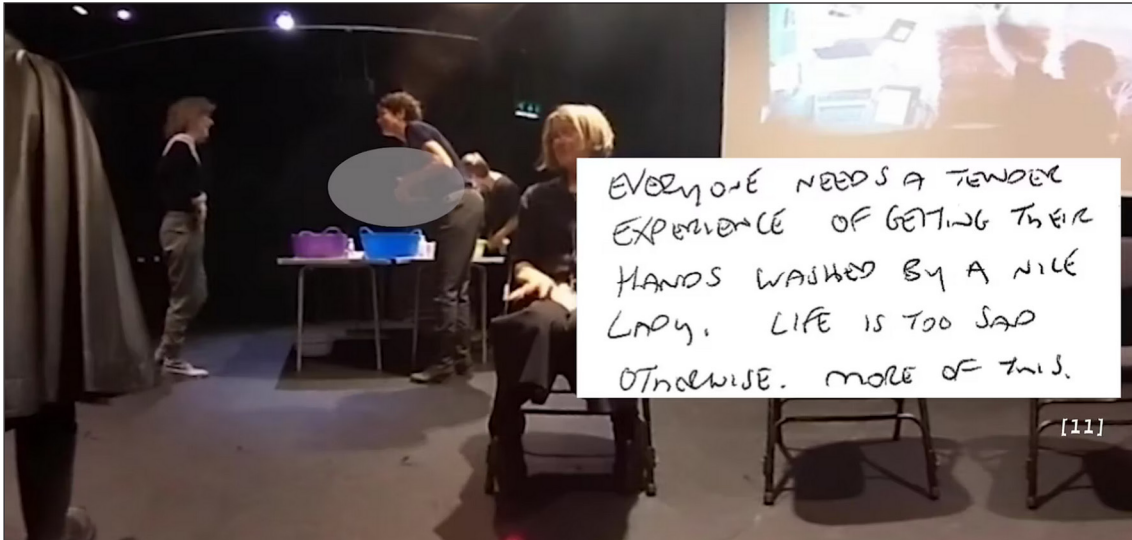


VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.9582>.

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STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE



VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[Note: This is a transcript of a video article. Onscreen text appears left justified, while spoken words are indented. Individual elements from the transcript, such as metadata and reference lists, may appear more than once in the document, in order to be properly read and accessed by automated systems. The transcript can be used as a placeholder or reference when it is not possible to embed the actual video, which can be found by following the DOI.]

[00:10]

Thresholds of Touch

We are in a crisis of touch, according to Kearney [1], prompting a need to reconsider and revalue our tactile behavior and the reciprocity of touching.

This crisis provided a starting point for the interactive performance experiment Thresholds of Touch.

[00:35]

[The following text is also spoken by Marloeke:]

This video article presents and reflects on this performative experiment Thresholds of Touch that took place two months before the first UK-Covid19 lockdown[2] which further amplified concerns about touch being in crisis and a desire for touch.

The video article uses artistic embodied strategies to engage with the participants experiences through the layering, re-enactments and live-tracing of their visual and written responses, and through our spoken and written reflections, to create an analytical dialogue with the performance and as a route to newly research and attune to touch.

[Onscreen text not spoken:]

Puig de la Bellacasa's care-full and multimodal approach to research pleads for scholars to move along with the people, organisms, and things studied instead of making objectifying moves.

Only through affect, she suggests, do we find: "a way of relating to them, of inevitably becoming affected by them, and of modifying their potential to affect others" [3].

[01:55]

[The following text is also spoken by Carey:]

The performative experiment *Thresholds of Touch* and this video article execute this relational approach to care-fully [4] explore the reciprocity of physical touching with others, the self, the environment, and objects.

We invite you as the viewer to move together to become a researcher yourself.

What *Thresholds* related to physical touching do you experience?

Thresholds of Touch: a short performative experiment in tactile exploration

23 January 2020, 7:00pm–9:00pm

Location

Bloomsbury Theatre Studio

15 Gordon Street

London

WC1H 0AH

[02:35]

[Much of the following voiceover is also closed captioned.]

Marloeke van der Vlugt

Carey Jewitt

Falk Hübner

[Marloeke:]

Thresholds was developed through a two-year collaboration between artist/researcher Marloeke van der Vlugt — that's me — composer/researcher Falk Hubner, and —

[Carey:]

— me, Carey Jewitt, I am a UCL Professor of technology and interaction.

[Marloeke:]

My artistic research practice is at the intersection of Theatre, Scenography and Fine Arts. In *Thresholds* I draw on work on Tactilism by Futurist Marinetti [5]

and Lygia Clark's relational objects [6] as I am exploring the reciprocity of touch through my artistic process.

[Carey:]

I have been exploring touch and its digital mediation through the In-Touch project funded by the European Research Council [7]. A key aspect of the project is to assemble multimodal and multisensory social methods and resources with which to enter into and document participant touch experiences.

[Marloeke:]

This collaboration was founded on our shared interest in touch and the challenges of researching it. As people often find it hard to recall or talk about touch experiences [8], the Thresholds experiment was developed as a 'tactile preparation chamber' to sensitize and activate people to share and document their touch experiences.

[Carey:]

An invitation to participate in a research performance experiment was widely circulated. Its touchy and challenging character was made clear. On arrival at the venue foyer participants were welcomed by me, and it was made clear that they could leave and return at any point during the experiment. When there was an uneven number of participants, one participant was designated an observer. All participants were given a pocket-size notebook to reflect on and capture their experiences of the experiment.

Use this notebook, your body and a pen to observe and reflect on the touches that you witness or experience. Can you feel the 'echo' of touch? Find ways to document these: use your body to mirror the touch, act-it-out, sketch, write, jot.

You do not have to identify yourself — these notes can be anonymous. You will be asked to return the notebook at the end of the session. You can photograph them as a personal record if you like.

From this moment on the dramaturgy of the performance builds from a straightforward daily touch routine and working ambiance, slowly narrowing to an abstract imaginary object and theatrical illusion.

[Image: plan of Bloomsbury Studio]

As this map shows, we created four different stations in the studio where actions could take place simultaneously. Station one for a hand washing ritual, a line of chairs for the

participants to settle in, station three for Falk to compose sounds with a sheet of hand-knitted electric wire. Station four is the live video projection to enable participants to visually experience Falk's physical interaction with the knitted sheet.

[05:27]

Thresholds of Touch

Scene 1 —

Sensitizing Touching:

Handwashing as Ritual

[Carey:] Thresholds started with a sensitizing experiment that engaged with hand-washing as a ritual, a hygienic practice, and a gesture of care. This opened us up to explore our thresholds of a stranger's touch, and touch as care. We all made ourselves vulnerable, explored the feel of power, the labor of caring-touch, its affects, the memories provoked and the engagement realized.

[05:34]

[video insert [9]]

[Marloeke:] The method of this video article, and the performance itself, is to interrogate touch through an empathetic dialogue with our and the participants' experiential touching bodies. We recreated the original performance timeline by editing 360 video and fixed and roaming camera footage. We added graphical highlights to draw attention to specific aspects of our touching bodies, that express a reciprocal gesture or action related to the touchy-feely ambiance. We then re-visited the participant notebooks multiple times.

[06:44]

[Participant:] so for the beginning
for left hand I have a ring on
quite small and feel cold all the time (during winter)
at the beginning of the performance
soap, silky, warm water, kinda nice
then I rubbed my hands that it became foamy
then washed it

[Marloeke:] Our selections were informed by ‘remarks about transformations or changes’ and by our bodily-activation to feel or do in response to the notebooks, exploring the reciprocity of touching by mirroring them, in an effort to creep under the participants’ skin. Extracting, rescaling, redrawing, animating and tracing their responses to produce a collage [10] of experiential fragments that form a visual overlay to the original footage. We invite you to feel along with the participants and us.

[Carey:] Thresholds moved us and participants between the role of a sensitizing research tool, a listening caregiver, an artist-performer, a participant and an observer. We shifted between these roles to collectively orchestrate touch.

[07:28]

[Participant:] waiting to be washed
someone will wash me

[Participant:] Handwashing. I remember feeling revulsion, when I see people leave bathrooms without washing their hands.

[Participant:] Did you specifically pick women for this task of facilitating the handwashing? You’re right. I wouldn’t want a man [11].

[Participant:] Everyone needs a tender experience of getting their hands washed by a nice lady. Life is too sad otherwise. More of this.

[Participant:] How “old” and familiar washing my hands is... And yet it makes me feel so young to have somebody doing it for me

[Participant:] Having my hands washed, feeling comforted, vulnerable. Flashback of caring for patients,

[Public service video of many different people handwashing]

[Participant:] When did anyone last wash my hands for me? I don’t know!

[Participant:] Having hands washed was very soothing. It felt good to be taken care of.

[Participant:]

rub rub rub

wash wash wash

soap soap soap

water water water

cup cup cup

metal metal metal

hand hand hand

cold cold cold

towel towel towel

dry dry dry

bit wet bit wet bit wet

[Participant:] Oh no, don't touch! I'll vomit!!!

[09:48]

[Carey:] The second part of this sensitizing experiment is a surprising invitation to first put one hand in a bowl of cold water and the other in a bowl of hot water, and second to put both hands in a bowl of warm water. This action produces a tingling sensation and a strange sense of bodily dissociation.

[09:57]

[Participant:] I was surprised by the temperature, my hands feel clean, and smelt nice, that I don't want to touch anything after that...

This experiment set the scene for us and participants to experience the everyday as unfamiliar in order to open a new space for touching and feeling together.

[Participant:] Softness

Contrast

Comfort

Care

Warmth

Connection

Living

Feeling temperature

Or as Cranny-Francis puts it: "The subject's embodied being is renegotiated in their experience" [in the engaged experience of touching] [12]

[10:09]

[Participant:] Warm water

You feel love, embraced, held, confronted.

Cold water

wild nature, energy, awake

[Participant:] Nobody seemed to want to touch their own hands after they were washed. They looked so precious, immaculate.

[Participant:] Hilarious how people seem so conscious of their hands afterwards.

[Participant:] Being washed. The ritual of receiving the blessings of clear water, washing old patterns, washing negative emotions you carry in your body, mind and soul

[Participant:] Discover the own body by touching others hand. Purification (Jesus' foot?). Ritual

[12:24]

[Marloeke:] [13] Falk generated the sound of the space using a knitted sheet of electric conductive wire developed by me at a very early stage of our collaboration. This artefact explores thresholds of touch based on the paradox of attraction and repulsion that are related to the contradiction of the comfort of knitted garments and the danger of electricity. It reacted to direct and proximal touch, making it possible to trigger sounds with the body. Falk physically interacted with this artefact to improvise an audible and visual sensation of touch. He created sounds by combining real-time touch with objects and the manipulation of pre-recorded sounds of touching a variety of natural and man-made textures and materials. Think of a metal spoon scraping ceramic tiles, or walking through dry forest leaves.

[15:14]

[Carey:] At this point nearly all the participants are seated in a circle. When the circle is complete, we will shift the performative tone to create a space for social touch to be explored. The scenography will transition from an open space to a more intimate one: the video projection is stopped, and the lighting is lowered to a level where people can still see each other and not go into 'theatre' mode. From this moment on, Marloeke will become a touch guide, using her tone of voice, tempo or silence to negotiate between instruction and poetic composition, while she and the participants carefully sense the thresholds of touch that they are willing to cross with each other. How might our experiences of the pandemic change our anxiety or pleasure of touching others? Have our thresholds and caring touch practices shifted?

[16:10]

Scene 2 —

Social Touching

[Marloeke:]

Hey, welcome again

How are you doing?

Are you sitting comfortably?

Can you hear me?

So, if I am not clear enough, that might be my pronunciation

You just have to ask, ok?

So, we are gonna start

And I am going to ask Lili and Carey – could you touch a few people?

[16:57]

[Participant:] My neighbour's hand was warm and soft

even we are strangers

but it is kinda nice

we considered we're equal in power of handshakes. I guess we are both girls?

If you have been touched, just turn a bit to your right

And then the other person can turn to the left of course

And just shake hands

Just give each other a hand

[17:22]

[Participant:] Someone hands on you allergies!!

everyones hands are different they say...

what you work on

your gender

your care

So, when was the last time you actually shook hands like that?

You can talk to each other.

[Participant:] “Strangers & touch is very problematic. Touching by strangers makes me feel ill. Eye contact is likely to send me over the edge.”

So, can you try again?

Try and give each other a hand

So, who has the power?

What does this mean?

Do you feel that one of you has more power than the other?

What does that actually mean?

Is it a firm handshake, is it the length, is it like, how you are positioning yourself?

Let’s get a really good, powerful handshake.

[18:33]

[Participant:] Squeeze

Indented

The surprising firmness of you gripping my ankles

Just look at your hands. Is there an imprint? A ring? Flesh dented? No?

Then you would know who had the power. So go to the next one.

[18:45]

[Participant:]

The feeling on my hand

my left hand

I always feel the ring on my left hand

it is also the reason I put it on the left instead of the right so I won’t distract my sense when I draw

or do things with my right hand.

It’s a bit more difficult maybe.

[Participant:] “Touching a stranger is a kind of intimate. Not because of the spot, but more because of the manner of touching made me feel known much faster.”

Can you give an equal handshake?

Is it possible to give each other an equal handshake?

So what is an equal handshake? That there is no power at all,

So it's really like you are on the same level.

Is that actually true? Is that possible? Can you be like that?

[Participant:] "I remember that our hands were the perfect match and we couldn't relate to the sense of an unequal handshake."

[Participants:] Maybe. / For a moment.

[Marloeke:] For a moment?

It is really hard to give an equal handshake.

[Participants:] We fluctuate.

[Marloeke:] Okay, the last one.

Can you give a comforting handshake?

[19:53]

[Participant:] Reassurance of a comforting handshake, connecting, connectedness, wholeness

Just go on a little bit.

We go do something else

Can you grab each other's wrists, just above the hand

[20:30]

[Participant:]

Touch

Wrists

hold

Hold it a bit

And squeeze a little

[20:40]

[Participant:]

I don't like my wrists.

You're making me ill.

Wrists = pulse = blood = am I alive?

Don't hurt me there.

Not too hard

Just a little

How is the skin reacting to that squeeze?

[Participant:] "My hands are tingling. The base of my mouth near my wisdom teeth feels shivery like acidic."

Are you holding your neighbour or is your neighbour holding you?

Try to distinguish between being squeezed and the one squeezing

[Carey:] Physical touching evokes attentiveness [14] to the reciprocity of one's actions. Which in turn may lead to an ethical awareness of one's relation to the outside world.

[Marloeke:]

Can you slowly turn your wrist a little bit?

Don't go too far.

Just try to feel how flexible the other person is.

Just a little bit.

So for the next thing, you might want to do that one by one.

Can one of you locate the other's heartbeat with your fingers?

Can you actually sense the heartbeat?

Can you do it with your thumb, or do you need two fingers for that?

[Participant:] I could feel heartbeat very clearly even a few minutes after the end of the exercise

It might be tucked away, hiding.

It should be there though.

Really

[Participant:] Everybody has a heartbeat

[Marloeke:] If you found it you can turn around

[Carey:] In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time. This reciprocal embodied sensation [15] may evoke care for the self and the other.

[Marloeke:] Try and feel if you can also sense the blood flowing.

[Participant:] This is gross.

Can you actually feel something else beneath the skin?

Is there something else?

[Participant:] “I used to play with my cats, as a child, holding them down and investigating their bone structure under the fur and skin. Guilty pleasure. When I investigated the feeling of my partners wrist, it reminded me of this.”

You can push a little bit.

You can swap, whenever you would like to swap, you can.

Are you ok?

Find it?

You can now release the wrist.

Just sit back a bit.

[24:16]

Scene 3 —

Environmental or Proximal Touching

[Marloeke:]

Just cross your arms in front of you

And raise your right hand

Stretch your right index finger.

Then, put the tip of your finger in your mouth.

Get it out again, it is a bit wet.

[Participant:] “Putting finger in my mouth — spreading germs”

Just hold it up.

Pull it out and hold it up in the air.

Can you feel the vibration traveling through your body?

[Participant:] To imagine that in the air there is some energy floating and if you pay some attention to it you might feel something

Can you sense the sound waves touching your finger?

You might want to make little circles in the air.

[Participant:] Touching the SOUND

[Participant:] to think of it, there are some songs or music that when it plays it always gives me goosebumps or tingling my skin. Is it a reaction from the touch of soundwave to my skin?

Do you receive my voice?

[Participant:] blood pulsing at fingertip

So now you are becoming, or maybe you already are, conductive [16].

You have become a receiver.

Just know that your skin has little mouths on its pores [17].

[Participant:]

feeling the soundwave

I have never thought of feeling 'the touch of sound' with my hand before as normally we always use my ears to hear or feel it

Do you receive my voice?

[25:50]

Scene 4 —

Self-touching

[Marloeke:]

Place your right finger in the little hollow in the base of your neck

In the small voice box

It actually moves up and down when you swallow

[Photo: voice box [18]]

Then draw from there

a circle around your neck

Some people can, some people can't

You can also make half a circle

[Participant:] “I enjoyed making a circle around my neck with my finger”

complete the circle

It is not possible to complete the circle

So, at the side, you may be able to locate your jugular vein.

It's a really big vein from the corner of your jaw to the clavicle

It's in between there, it's both sides

So it doesn't really matter at what side you are

[Photo: jugular vein [19]]

It's one of the biggest veins. They bring blood from your head to the superior vena cava, which is the largest vein in the upper body. It's your heart line.

Can you feel it?

Very delicate spot.

Does it tremble?

[Carey:] Self-touch can be soothing and comforting. A remedy for skin hunger [20]. Although during the pandemic face touching was discouraged.

[Marloeke:]

Rub your upper arms with your hands

Slowly rubbing

And just know, if you can find the speed of 3 to 5 cm per second

It's the speed that is best for a soothing, calming impact [21]

So, 3 to 5 cm per second

It really has a very calming effect

[Participant:] Sooth yourself 3–5 cm/s

[Participant:] Touching my upper arms slowly felt nice. Putting pressure on my partner's wrist felt strange.

[28:46]

Scene 5 —

Object Touching

[Marloeke:]

Now you can put your hands on your knees

And position them upwards

Place your hands in your lap, palms facing up

I invite Carey to give you an object.

And you can just hold it in your hands if you have it

[Video insert of dyeing, tying and knotting the cloth (Bandhani) in Bjuh, India. The pieces are used to cover the objects. Created and filmed by M.van der Vlugt in 2017 [22]]

[Carey:] Participants are given a gift, an object wrapped in silk with tiny, braille-like, tie-dyed knots.

[Marloeke:]

Don't drop it, be careful.

Really hold it, if you have it.

[Carey:] It is only through touch that they can experience many of its properties. We touch objects and they touch us back [23]. They call forth our actions and emotions.

[Marloeke:]

So, your hands caressing

Hands wiping tears

[Carey:]

Gifts create connections and expectations [24].

[Participant:] "Touching the hand dyed / tied cloth was nice & felt human; like receiving a present"

[Marloeke:]

Cotton

Angora

Satin

Brocade

Calico

Canvas
Cashmere
Charmeuse
Chiffon
Crepe
Damask
Denim
Felt
Flannel
Flax
Gauze
Gabardine
Hemp
Lace
Lamé
Linen
Guipé
Leather
Mohair
Velvet
Wool
Cotton
Or maybe silk

Did you read the tiny little knots with your fingers?

[Participant:] Meeting wrapped object

Unknown, confusing, mixed medium, inviting, squishy, silky, curious

Let's continue, how will you know what is inside?

In the past measuring objects was done with the whole body [25],

[Participant:] Using other body-parts to experience the object

The object was compared to the various body parts

You may use every body part you want

[Participant:] Rolling the foam ball on my arms + thighs + head. What is felt differently through other surfaces?

Let's continue

Trace, strike, pat

What is the object's volume, could it fit in your bag?

What is its shape, its outline?

Stroke, brush, rub

How much does it weigh?

What is its temperature?

Palpate, pinch, tap — the structure of the surface,

Mold, finger, fondle

How hard, how soft

Move, shake, fold

Does it make a sound?

Does it have a smell?

What colour do you think the object has?

Can you actually feel beneath the fabric?

[Video insert showing the creation process of the objects, created and filmed by M.van der Vlugt [26]]

You may now unwrap your gift.

Close your eyes if you want to.

[Participant:]

The object smelt nice

The stitches on the object felt nice when I ran my finger along them.

The pattern stitch on the object's wrap felt good.

The object had hidden bits you discover, at points I could feel under its 'skin'

I didn't like the feel of the hard object inside the soft one

RUBBERY

SQUISHY

Let's first explore the skin
It is soft, fluid?
It is moving, breathing
Can you imagine being part of the object?
Hands becoming skin

[Participant:]

Not gonna lie, I found it really odd.
The object disturbed me

[Participant:]

I thought my object was super weird
It looked like a cow's tongue
or a heart, I didn't want to touch it

Just run over the surface with your fingertips
Draw a circle around it
A line up and down
Slowly, remember the 3 to 5 cm per second.
Where does the object begin, where does it end?

[Participant:]

golden fish
in an aquarium
lonely

[Participant:]

mysterious OBJECT
Its skin? shell?
the heart
when I hold it,
it felt like I'm holding some creature's heart

[Marloeke:]

Hold the object in different positions
Push the outside skin a little.

What amount of pressure can you give it without it being torn?

What does it take to break the skin?

How hard, how soft, how long before it breaks?

[Participant:]

Eyeball

Stitched up — horror

Zombie

Is it present?

memories — how do I foreground me + the object?

Not alive

Cold

Putting a finger in an orange — blindfolded at brownies!!

How long does it take for it to bounce back, to take its original shape again after squeezing? Did you also give it an 'equal' touch, a comforting one?

Did your touch leave a mark on the object?

An imprint? Maybe from a ring?

Did it leave a mark on you?

The object is touching you back.

It talks to you if you listen.

It will tell you what's inside in given time.

It just needs a little attention.

Remember, you have eyes in your hands

and mouths on your pores

[Video insert showing the knitting of the plaster casting in the object, Created and filmed by M. van der Vlugt [27]]

[Video insert showing a closeup of the object, related to the haptic eye. Created and filmed by M. van der Vlugt [28]]

Don't drop, just hold it

Just try to squeeze it out

It's okay if it goes through the threads

[Participant:]

HEAVY

[Participant:]

it made me feel sick

Can you now put it back?

Now find a part of the object you really like.

The the part you really like to touch.

If you can't remember, you can also close your eyes.

[Participant:]

Holding hand and object

It's okay

Warmth

Support

Connection

Being in the world with the other

And again, grab the hand of your neighbour

One hand, the object, and the other hand, your neighbour.

Just squeeze a little

First your neighbour

Then the object

First your neighbour

Then your object

First the object

Then your neighbour

First the object

Then your neighbour

[Participant:] "After squeezing the hard object out of the "gift", and after starting to handle it with more pressure, I felt my first touch back with the person next to me. Why is that? Did I recalibrate? Can you recalibrate touch?"

Thank you very much.

So, this was the ending.

[39:48]

[Carey:]

A final thought on method to close this video article.

Thresholds used diverse artistic strategies to foster newly attuned touch interaction with objects, the environment, others, and the self — all focused on raising awareness of the reciprocity of physical touching.

This included surprise, blurring the boundaries between performer and audience, re-sensitizing exercises, and empathic bodily interrogation of our and the participants' experiences of touch.

[Marloeke:]

Second, this video article as collage has used a relational approach and proposed novel artistic strategies of enactment as inspirations and as an invitation to move together along a series of physical tactile interactions — to explore what tactile interaction can be, and push forward touch vocabularies and practices toward potential routes to collectively engage with, revalue, and establish affective, and inclusive ways for touching and feeling together.

This establishes touch[ing] as a care-full engagement [29] and positions touching as a process of shifting affect and power across thresholds, which requires a critical view on response-abilities [30].

“Ways of knowing/caring re-affect objectified worlds

restage things in ways that generate possibility for other ways of relating and living

connect things that were not supposed to be connecting across the bifurcation of consciousness

and ultimately transform the ethico-political and affective perception of things by involvement in the mattering of worlds.” [31]

[41:52]

A video article by Marloeke van der Vlugt and Carey Jewitt: research, performance, editing, voice-overs, in collaboration with Falk Hübner: performance, research and sound editing.

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UCL — University College London

ERC — European Research Council

NWO — Dutch Research Council

HKU — University of the Arts Utrecht

UVH — University of Humanistic Studies

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Find out more here: <https://in-touch-digital.com/>
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 it's also fucking
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