

Touch Stays

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Written as a part of MFA Performing Arts studies at the Iceland University of the Arts.

Touch Manifesto

Touch is a superpower

Touch goes through everything

Touch reveals the hidden

Touch reminds of

Touch is a process

Touch is an intra-action

Touch happens all the time inside all of us

We create touch, we co-create touch

We intra-act inside each other and co-create this multi-sensed reality

Boom.

Touch organizes attention

Touch demands attention, intention?

Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones, your neurons, your cells and sequences

Before touch, there is space in-between of us

Before touch, the space is like a thick pillow

Before touch, there is a direction

Before touch, there is an intention

Before touch, there is reaching towards

Before touch

tension, wish, attention.

In this essay, I write through the process of the poetic movement performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* (working title) which is structured as a book. The process spans over a year and intratwines many people, friends, lovers, and colleagues together with thoughts, projects, and play. I am very thankful to all of them, especially to Katarina Huber, who has been my partner of magic throughout this year and in the final performances.

I write in the first person because I let this project under my skin, inside my organs, flowing through my words and my blood. This project is not me, but part of me that has been hiding for a long time. This is me-visible, me-poem, me-chaos, me-bodymind.

How can a performance reveal the permanence, non-ephemerality, and accumulation of touch? How does such a performance affect the audience's experience of response-ability¹ and activate care for their surroundings, others, and themselves? How can the experiences of consent, touch, pleasure, and play on the body be translated and made visible to the spectator or even felt inside the body of the witness?

I wish for the audience to leave my performance with reflections on their own effect on others and vice versa. How is my touch the source of care, the activator, or the cause of trauma? This is something I aim to make visible through various performative, poetic, and visual actions as well as in this essay, showing the process of making, collecting, gathering, and accumulating connections, materials, knowledge, experience, methods, ideas, insights, and learnings.

Holding Meanings—Reaching Towards

Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us. (Le Guin 1986)

With my words, I'm holding, touching, giving a place to be, a place to arrive and to rest, to nest. A word touches. It gets born in my guts, in my belly; it touches the insides of my stomach, moves up slowly or quickly with abdominal muscle pressure, starts to become sound at the vocal cords that flap to create soundwaves as the air

passes them, caressing the powerful root of the tongue, wrapping around it, poking my teeth from behind, and finally opening my lips. Sound touches my insides first and then caresses the world, tickling via the air everything and everyone—their skin, their hairs on their ears, going in, continuing the journey in their imaginations, enveloping their stories and worlds. Some words are swallowed, sucked back inside; this silencing holds meaning. Some words are shouted at others to hurt or to express pain, as swords creating more hurt. Words can be medicine or words can be violence. Words accumulating, piles on piles forming on our bodyminds, sonic tattoos of wordsounds, echoing in memoryskin, layers, and layers, and layers.

Skin is an envelope that contains the organs, soft tissues, fluids, and holds us together; we can choose what we include to be inside our skin. In my poem *Touch Manifesto* I write: “Touch cannot not be noticed by your hormones, your neurons, your cells and sequences,” meaning that all touches are recognised by the body, since the skin as a boundary is porous. In the resulting performance *Take This Touch Inside Your Body* of my practice-research, we can choose what we take in and what we take part in. During the performance, audience is invited to collect pages in the order they wish to form their own book, novel, or bundle of medicine. The pages of the book represent the different parts of the performance and can work as memories of the experience. I give an opportunity for audience members to get a symbol of permanent touch on their bodies, a small point of a tattoo that is done by my collaborator and performance partner Katarina Huber during the performance. It becomes a symbol of the accumulation and permanence of touch.

In my previous written work, a Master’s thesis for Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts entitled *Noticing Power Relations when Teaching Touch in Contact Improvisation*, I talk about touch as the first sense and companion of movement; touch and movement support each other (Kukkonen 2021). This means that being touched is never a passive experience; nor is watching a performance about touch passive as it might activate processes in the bodyminds of the audience. In the performance, Katarina and I use movement to make the effects of touch visible.

Intra-action is a term I use when talking about touch. It describes the encounter between two or more entities where agency, the ability to act, emerges—“[t]he mutual constitution of entangled agencies”

(Barad n.d.) according to feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad. In intra-action, the change takes place inside both together; there is no separation.

Do I talk about violence or care? Do I show the negotiation of consent and give examples or do I bring forward trauma-activating stories? In *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway argues that “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges... It matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 2016). In *Take This Touch Inside Your Body*, I bring forward the care, the safety, and the accrual of safety rather than the trauma, and show how I got there.

We come to existence by touching. “By rubbing against the world, I define myself to myself (Juhan 2003).” Author and bodyworker Deane Juhan writes that there is no one-way touch; it always contains both directions. In the work of Barad, the binaries of active-passive, leader-follower, and subject-object are dissolved with the wording of intra-action and response-ability. Touch happens inside things—matter, discourse, and bodies. According to Barad, “Touching is a matter of response. Each of us is constituted in response-ability. Each of us is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other” (Barad n.d.). In this rewriting of responsibility, something more queer, chaotic, mutual, and messier can happen. Response-ability makes space for courage and bravery (Beaulieux 2019).

I invite you to touch, to witness, and to enter. My invitation demands your response. I want to organise spaciousness and clarity around decisions. In a performance with an audience, my invitation implies time and clarity for them to know what is expected. Contact improvisation dancer and teacher Nancy Stark-Smith said that “[t]ension masks sensation” (Koteen and Smith 2021); I wish to create space where tension can be freed for more sensation.

Listening Consent—Gathering Trust

Inside the movement practice, Katarina and I establish safety and accountability. We have decided to stay with the trouble and keep connected even if mistakes happen. Philosopher and artist Erin Manning writes about reaching out, already asking the other to “become a medium of expression... This multidimensional movement of desire is violent, for it presupposes a certain demand, a decision, an instance of response-ability” (Manning 2007). Manning emphasises that as we reach to touch, we touch what the

other will become in the process of the touch. Reaching to touch is a risk—relating to the unexpected with someone we don't know, connecting the boundaries of skin to the shared unknown.

The title picture of Melanie Bonajo's video installation *When the Body Says Yes* is a screenshot² of many people spooning each other, in layers. I connect this image with my work's aim to show the layering of touch, how all its sedimentations are still there, seeping through the layers. Another connection my performance has with Bonajo's work is the topic of touch, consent, and the understanding that we, as humans, are lost in knowing what we want; we don't dare to ask even when we know. In both Bonajo's work and my own, the audience reflects on their own experiences of touch by seeing the performers go through processes of negotiation and interaction.

Author Brené Brown writes about trust, shame, and leadership. In her book *Daring Greatly*, she tells a story about a jar of marbles collected in relationships with people and how every little moment of connection either puts more marbles in the jar or takes them away (Brown 2015). Trust accumulates in small actions and moments and needs time; all of it can be taken away with one action.

Balancing Between Waves of Excitement and Walls of Resistance

Am I writing about waves, weight, and gravity? Intuition and gravity pull, push towards something, letting things fall in their places, like books on a floor. Books fall. Do words fall in their places? Cycles, patience, listening to the weight, listening to the rhythm. With relaxation, weight, knowing when to take the wave—not too early, not too late. Having the energy to fall when it's the right moment, the right place for it. In a dance, the strength of the pull, pushing towards something, moves us forward.

Resistance makes up the landscape in which the flow of a river can run; it gives shape and structure for the waves, the flow, and the excitation. Boundaries create friction; I can feel my body of water, my body of excitement rub on my surroundings. If there would be no walls, the waters would spill all over the landscape.

My methodology for this creative process has been to follow waves of excitement and intuition in a sustainable way. To feel the waves, I practice improvisation, playplay³, listening, patience, rest, somatic movement practices (especially authentic movement), and Body-Mind Centering®, a movement and therapy approach to embodiment using movement, touch, voice, and mind (Hartley 1995). I have also introduced alternative methods to my process, as I have been drawing for the first time in my work, doing automatic writing, layering images, and writing poetry to accumulate pages and make connections visible.

I felt the flow and weight of intuition in choosing my mentors and collaborators for this project. How I found Katarina to be my collaborator and a mentor was especially magical. In September 2021, they opened a sex-positive space called Spektrum Reykjavík which offers space for rope practice, yoga, bodywork, healing, and relational work. I contacted Katarina and felt a pull toward them right away. I appreciate the way they communicate their needs and are open to hear mine, which informs the groundedness of our work together.

We meet regularly to practice and to have conversations. Our meetings start by checking in and end with checking out. In these sessions, one person speaks and the other listens without interrupting. This helps to acknowledge the feelings that are present, which enables us to concentrate on what is happening in our moment of encounter and practice. Before each movement or touch session, we negotiate boundaries and wishes for touch and distance. We work with different themes, topics, and timeframes.

Throughout this year, we have organised and taught workshops about hugging, pain, and the spectrums of touch. This work has woven into the performance process as a gathering of trust, experiences, and knowledge. In the performance project, Katarina's role is to perform and support, providing time and conversation by bringing their own professional and personal experiences about healing and energy work, touch, and consent. I have assumed the role of driving force as the project is part of my studies in the MFA in Performing Arts. My role is to organise and plan the meetings and keep the project moving forward.

I use the concept of praxis to explore the permanence of touch. I practice different theories of intra-action and response-ability as well as practices of consent and communication in movement and in the performance. The practice itself is theory, creates theory, and is not separate from it (Nelson 2006).

The images I chose to support this text are shot as video underwater by Dan Farberoff; I manipulated screenshots to fade out the element of water. The images present one side of the process, how an experienced reality differs from the story of an image. These pictures show the effect of touch as

energy on the body, even though the situation of filming was not similar compared to when Katarina and I met in the studio to move. In a still image, what remains visible from the original experience? Words can change the experience of seeing an image of an experience, and the experience of seeing touch can be changed with words.

Letting Go

I discovered the non-ephemeral attribute of touch and the accumulation of that permanence through my praxis. This accumulation and permanence are found in the layers and cycles of meanings that are present in our bodies through experienced touch. I believe performance can reveal the accumulation of touch and open the process of what's happening inside of a bodymind. The means can be various, but I believe primarily in creating spaces that allow multiple ways of being while creating space for myself as a performer. As I can't control what happens inside of other people, I can only give impulses, meet them halfway, and trust they make the same journey towards me or, in this case, the performance. For me, it's about letting go of judgements and helping others do it as well.

I wish to make clear that sensing, or seeing a performance is active, like being touched is actively receiving. In performance, through experiments, it's possible to get closer to that with attention. Together, we can create a laboratory-like space where we look at social behaviour, where there is time to feel what is happening in-between of us and inside our bodies. In the performance, I want to show mistakes, that it's okay to be messy and chaotic. It's about practicing together.

In the performance, I show the negotiation of touch as a way of keeping the process open and transparent. Through this process of writing, I become aware of the meanings of words and how they affect everything. In the performance situation, the kind of verbal cues I use likewise affects the experience of the audience.

I poke around structures that give me safety; I test what I need in order to stay response-able. I enjoy having a space where I can relax to the unknown, not be in a state of panic, and yet, riding the wave. This year of working on a project on touch has been important for me, as I have built up trust in myself and gathered self-confidence. I am aiming to accrue a sustainable way to work with art and performance, and I have realised this could be possible when I connect projects with life, meaning, giving importance to what is already happening in life and making that part of the process.

Touch is a pillow; we are under piles of touch. Opening and closing skin, breathing, porous boundaries. I want to see an increase in awareness of touch in others and to nerd about it more myself. Touch accumulates. Touch shows my boundaries. Connecting with others makes me me. I respond, act, react, and intra-act differently according to who I am with. Being in touch with my environment affects me-waves, me-weight, and me-gravity.

My Gentle Manifesto

Wearing clothes for the weather is ok

Sitting on the floor is ok

Staying home is ok

Going out is ok

Taking time is ok

Being here is ok

Noticing, no, yes,

Using simple words to say complicated thoughts,
and using complicated words to say simple thoughts.

To get out of breath is ok

To make mistakes is ok

Noticing, no, yes,

Not reacting anymore, yet responding still,

Never staying still.

Still is ok

Being amazing is ok

Shining is ok

Taking space is ok

Being brilliant is ok

Using magnificent words for small things,
noticing there are no small things.

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Thanks to:

In intra-action, conversations, and collaborations with (not in any particular order): Katarina Huber, Dan Farberoff, Synes Elischka and Vilma Riitijoki (pupucollective), Angela Rawlings, Mart Piirimees, Kerly Ritval, Brogan Davison, Meeri Mäkinen, Nita Little, Helga Arnalds, the Atlantic Ocean, whales I haven't seen but I know exist, trauma therapy, Contact Improvisation community, the war in Ukraine, Covid-19, Instagram, loneliness, aloneness, Tinder, bad dates, good dates, lovers, the best kiss, Improv Enthusiasts, pools especially Nautholsvík.