

Speculative futures for Tactility Studies

by Shawn (in **black**) and Bernice (in **purple**)

It is March 2021, a full year since all performances have been suspended. Live performance spaces remain shuttered but museums and galleries have since been reopened. Tactility Studies has been commissioned as an installation at National Gallery Singapore.

1) Devise Tactility Studies as an installation with no performers. Describe how audiences will experience this work. (How many people will experience it at a time? How will their encounter be facilitated? What is the protocol for maintaining the work after each encounter?)

Shawn, Gua Khee, Corrie, and I, have been digging into the trajectory of Tactility Studies during this strange time -- it feels to me like it's been a time of rest, upheaval, busy-ness, and aimlessness. It's hard to think about touch literacy in the original context of the work (touch as pleasure, touch as affection, touch as safety, oxytocin, weird, transgressive, traumatic, painful, experimental, evocative) when all kinds of touch today feel potentially life-threatening.

(This morning, I saw a video of two children -- cousins -- hugging for the first time in months, and sobbing their hearts out. The other day, I visited my grandma for the first time in months, and the first thing she did was reach for a hug. My grandma isn't really a huge hugger. I normally offer the hugs before I leave, and it's a fairly new habit. She seemed more frail and tired than normal, but she wanted that hug. That hug made me think about how I need to ration my presence around others. I haven't been out much at all, but even then that hug felt good, but also like it could be poison. I don't think this feeling is going to go away for a long, long while, pending a vaccine. To feel more safe about those hugs, our brief visits, I decided I would steer clear of all other social visits as far as I could help it. Odd to ration a social life in terms of these risk analyses, but I suppose human touch and a sense of security do have a measurable relationship.)

I don't care about live performance if it means people die. But if death also comes with isolation and loneliness, perhaps the focus of this new speculative performance would shift in that direction. It would not be Tactility Studies the way it was created, at least not until we are truly sure that people can touch again, without prophylactic nor fear.

This installation would probably need to be called something else. Since it's not living in quite the same frame. Touch Artefacts? Touch Artefacture? Tactility Artfactory?

My first instinct was that we would use screens, or videos, something that captures the sense of touch through the visual. We could rely on objects, and then either gift them to the viewer, or wash/wipe them. But I think if the museum wanted this, we would need to be able to use the fact of shared space, and the fact of 'liveness' living on, in a place for objects and artefacts. So I'm going to go with my second instinct, which is to steer clear of screens,

have people keep their electronic devices outside, and keep the focus on what we can do about touch through visuals, objects, sound, and other environmental manipulations.

These are the steps I imagine taking, for creating the parameters of this (new) performance piece:

1. Request a large-ish space, able to be divided using transparent curtains. One performer needs to be present, for 4-5 audience members at a time.
2. The audience removes their shoes outside, and each follow a path of textures to their allocated spots. Not sure yet if blindfolds are used.
3. Each person steps into a cubicle of space, each with 5m x 5m of space, each able to see the others.
4. (If budgets allow) In each space, a large human-sized object, each made of a different material. The materials should evoke textiles in the home, mixed together differently. For example, aluminium foil mixed with Airism mesh; paper mixed with microfleece. To be discussed with visual collaborators. To be thoroughly washed/sanitised before every new group of audiences, depending on materials chosen.
(If budgets don't allow) Each audience member would have been asked to bring two things from home -- something they like to hug, and something they quite like to touch.
5. The performance will take the audience through a range of sensations -- bodily and emotional -- and seek to open bodies up to the vulnerability in purely body-to-body, wordless, narrative-free, connection. I won't go into the details of movement choreography in this, but we'd be paying attention to ways that people start to interact with the space, the objects, and each other. The performer would have rehearsed multiple ways of composing, balancing, touching, squishing, giving weight to, and moving in the space around their objects. The audience will be invited to have their own tactile experimentations, within the boundaries of good hygiene and safety, and these ideas may inspire the performer and other audiences as well. Audiences will each receive notice about what those are before arriving at their scheduled performance time. Translations will be provided if needed.
6. The performance will conclude with the Conversation Piece, in which we facilitate a discussion about the experience the audience went through as individuals, and as a group. Questions, complaints, revelations, ponderances -- all welcome.
7. Given that the work is likely to feel extra raw, or hit extra raw nerves at this time, we will plan for additional conversation time after the Conversation Piece, during which conversations may also be non-verbal. Some audience members may favour sitting quietly in the space, perhaps laying on the floor, touching an object as a self-soothing mechanism, and so on.
8. In this work, we are allowed to be like babies, curious about our sensations.

2 months later in May 2021, we are allowed to experience shows again, but it's been too long since we have encountered one another in theatres, black boxes and even rehearsal studios. A

new policy has been implemented, restricting performers from having any direct physical contact with audiences, and there must be a 1m radius around each audience member.

2) Write an advisory notice to your participants, bearing in mind that this will be the first time most of them will be entering/participating in a live performance after a long hiatus. How will you assist with rehabilitating their experience in this notice?

Dear friends and strangers,

We've missed you. We've missed being together to experience something. We've missed being in the theatre.

We don't know what this will be like. We don't know if we will be overwhelmed with emotion, or if we will be able to keep our personal feelings separate from our professional ones. Maybe we won't want to keep our feelings separate. What are our professional feelings for, if not for feeling together and making sense together through a time like this? Thank you for coming out to be with us. Thank you for taking the chance that it could be overwhelming. Or that it could be underwhelming. We don't know how our capacities for being in groups and sharing physical space have changed. We don't know how our capacities for sitting in a soup of other people's emotions and smells and hormones has shifted our experience of live performance. Please pay attention to your feelings as much as you can, and let your feelings be. Please leave at any point if you feel the need to. Or cry. Or laugh uncontrollably. It will be okay with us, and we will do our best to help you be okay also. We will also have people on standby, and a breakout room, should you need to chat and decompress at any time.

Tactility Studies has always been firstly a study of the body, and of bodies together, through the sense of touch. We play with the sensitisation and attunement of bodies -- of people -- together in space. We have never been therapists, even if we think there might be therapeutic outcomes in a work like ours. But we will be here with you in figuring out what it is we are going through. Thank you for trusting us with your time and for coming out to experience this work. We don't think of our performance as group therapy; but sometimes it might feel that way, and we are glad for it.

With hugs,

(everyone's names)

The Tactility Studies Team

3) Where will this performance be held? Draw a layout of how the audience, and performers will be organised, and how their movements be choreographed.

See above. Will probably stick to only 1 performer with a rotating schedule as performers likely would still not be touching, or able to rehearse for extensive periods of time.

4) Audience numbers are extremely limited. Who do you choose to prioritise? What do you put in place to ensure that the performance is accessible* for them? *Accessibility in meant here in an

expanded sense, whether in terms of infrastructural needs, immunocompromised status, age and ability, flexibility of time etc.

Depending on the budget, we could perform this over a few days with a team of performers taking turns. The schedule would allow for a mix of demographics, while specific invitations can be made out to groups.

While the elderly, especially those who live alone, would be a priority, we would also more likely want to visit them where they are than to bring them to NGS. This is something we would discuss with the curatorial team.

I imagine that young working adults, especially those without children, would be most starved of touch during this time. They would be my priority. If my assumption is not true, and there is no such audience urgently seeking a performance like Tactility Studies, then they would not be my priority.

We should also have a more specific discussion about the experiences that migrant workers living in dorms have been through, and/or that foreign domestic workers have been through, in this time -- and ways that this performance could speak to their lives, and its relationship to other workers' lives. We could work with migrant workers who have been making art and performing in Singapore all along. We may also choose to focus the performance for survivors of family violence, and the people who have had to move into crisis shelters.

5) Describe an object that the audience interacts with. How does this object become a proxy for touching one another? Alternatively, describe how the participants touch one another/performers across these distances.

See above.

6) You are a bored audience member, and somehow feeling detached from the performance. What is going through your mind, and what do you do? Does this resolve over the performance, or is this boredom acknowledged or facilitated somehow?

I'd like not to speculate on what might happen in any individual's mind! But I hope that they pass through boredom, and amusement, and joy, and awkwardness, and all other manner of feelings that they might go through, and that we would acknowledge and appreciate all of these feelings as they happen, and hold space for them. If this person chooses to talk about their emotional journey after the performance, I would love to listen also, and accept it as part of that temporal landscape. And if the person wanted to try experiencing the work again, I would also appreciate that.

In June 2021, you restage the work, but this time you managed to acquire a special license that permits touching to occur in the work (not more than 5 minutes across the entire performance).

7) This is the first time a participant will be 'touched' in any performance since March 2020. Describe sequence of motions leading up to this moment of 'touching', and how will it manifest? How is this space held?

The performer would need to read the participant's responses on the spot, but generally speaking, touch would begin very minimally, perhaps with only eye contact and maintaining a close distance without touching, connecting through the air and gesture. In 'Tactility Studies', we also use objects and sound to introduce touch, and never assume that someone would be comfortable or would remain comfortable. The original score has mechanisms for holding a safe space where consent - ongoing, enthused, consent - is key. This version of the work (or new work?) will follow that trajectory, with full attention paid to health and safety risks.

8) The performance has ended. You are an audience member. What do you do after the show, and where do you go? What stayed with you from the performance?

9) You receive an email from an audience member after the show, who had felt uncomfortable at one point in the work. (This discomfort isn't necessarily a complaint, but it could be). Write this email describing what made them feel uncomfortable and why. As a bonus, you can draft a response to this email.

(Leaving these unanswered for the reader to have more headspace for their own speculations)

In July 2021, Tactility Studies tours to Croatia. Unfortunately, air travel is still prohibitive, so you decide to stage the performance remotely, with local Croatian performers.

10) What are the 3 main points you'd emphasise to your international collaborators as they attempt to stage Tactility Studies? (You may also choose to describe the process of 'transmitting'/'translating' this work)

At this point, here are some points:

1. We practice over many days different ways of connecting through touch.
2. We sensitise ourselves to the verbal and non-verbal responses of individuals.
3. We pay attention to the whole audience, and notice what they might be paying attention to as a group.

We would also work closely with the Croatian team to not only work with performers but a dramaturg or director who can oversee the work. We would need to learn more about cultural specificities for touch, consent, body language, and group gatherings.