

TOUCH ————— ME THROUGH THE WINDOW

**Exploring my experiences of touch through
a pandemic.**

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DesignLab Thesis

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Melancholia, J



Jan Matejko, 1894





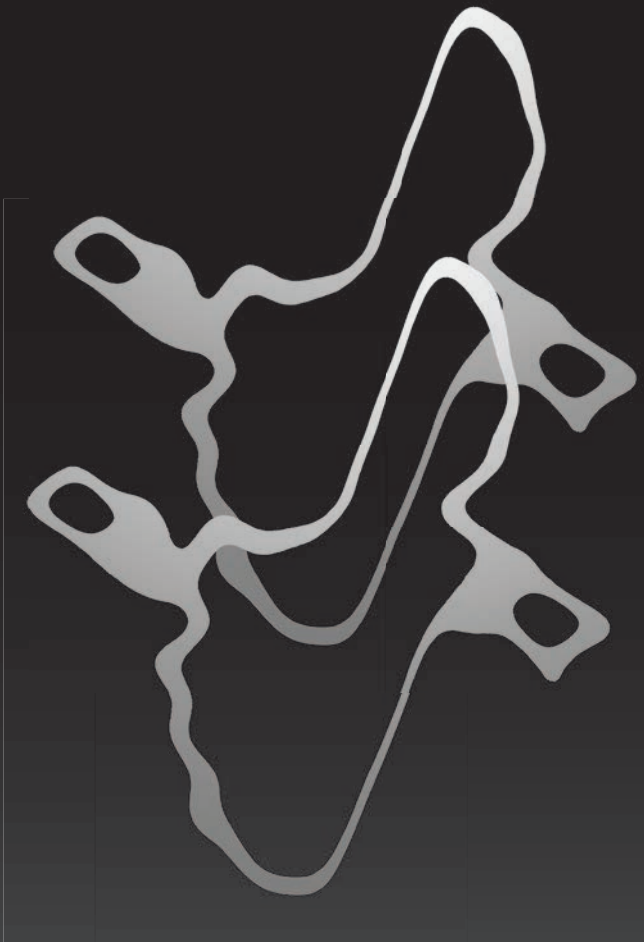
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I still hear your voice when you sleep next to me
I still feel your touch in my dreams
Forgive me my weakness but I don't know why
Without you it's hard to survive
'Cuz everytime we touch, I get this feeling,
& Everytime we kiss,
I swear I could fly,
Can't you feel my heart beat fast,
I want this to last,
Need you by my side.
'Cause every time we touch,
I feel this static,
And every time we kiss,
I reach for the sky,
Can't you hear my heart beat so,
I can't let you go,
Want you in my life.





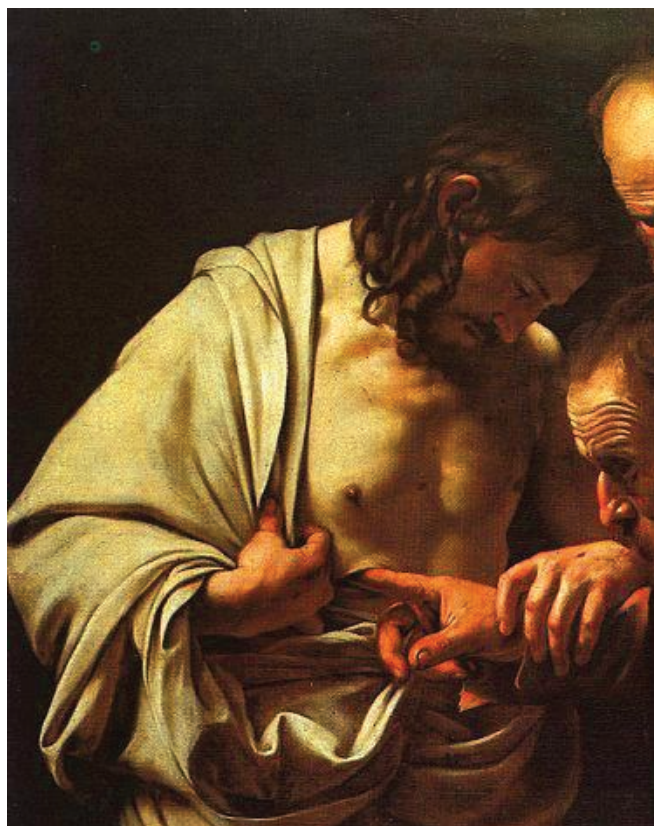
INTRODUCTION

Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth, as the popular saying goes. Touch relates, in the collective imagery, to reality. Tangible, meaning touchable in a literal sense, also means founded, true and quantifiable.

When Doubting Thomas sees Jesus after his resurrection, covered in scars from crucifixion, he does not believe him. For Thomas to believe Jesus, he has to insert his finger in the scars left by a roman spear. What was to him unimaginable, and what was unbelievable when seen, turned into an incontestable truth. He touched, therefore he knew. He had obtained tangible proof that Jesus' wounds were real.

When the 2020 coronavirus crisis limited my ability to touch and be touched, I found myself not believing anything was real. At first I thought all I could do was wait. When it became clear that the wait would be longer than expected, new ways to replace what until now had been touching had to be found. I started experimenting and experiencing the means which were accessible to me. It led me to consider and research theories around the concept of touch which I am sharing in this thesis.

I will be talking about my own experience with internet solutions, what I mean by touch, and sensory oriented reflexions. I also interviewed a few people who had important roles in my reflexion.



Caravaggio, c. 1602

Saint Thomas, Caravaggio, c. 1602





TOUCHING THE INTERNET

The Covid 19 pandemic was the first time in the existence of the internet that most of the world experienced touch scarcity. It was not a matter of specific demographics being excluded of the public space, and forced to seclusion, but a general ban on human contact. To cope with the loss, solutions that marginalized groups had come up with and had been using for the better part of two decades had to become mainstream.

MARGINALISED GROUPS PAVED THE WAY

For teenagers who didn't fit in and were pushed out of the public space, touch scarcity was harsh. Especially in rural areas, the lack of spaces to meet, exchange and develop counter cultures that resembled them created situations where words to describe concepts and struggles relevant to said teenagers existed, but where inaccessible.

The emergence of mainstream internet access in the early 2000's offered new solutions to remedy this situation. The internet being a wild DIY platform, accessible to all (with the means to), it became possible for anyone with a computer and an internet connexion to have access to many kinds of content which were not accessible to them before: written content and theory, movies deemed too subversive to be broadcasted, exchange forums, etc.. The Internet also allowed for non-physical meetings, which made it a lot safer for marginalised teens to reach people, as they no longer had to fear for their safety when going to a meeting place.

It also meant they had access to Internet Relay Chats (IRC, instant chat rooms), forums, blogs, and comment on articles. This allowed to bring discussions over topics which marginalized teenagers were concerned with closer to actors which were, before the emergence of said tools, excluded from. This meant it had become possible for teens of marginalized groups, provided they were already sensitive to those topics and had the background to understand the discussions, to be an active part of the definition of groups they felt they were a part of. Teenagers from rural areas could now be part of discussions regarding various terms relevant to them, but also enabled self discovery, and understanding their own behaviours and reactions. The speeches from other teens, thousands of kilometres away made sense. They were touched. They felt like they belonged. At that point, it became a matter of appropriating the cyber-space.

APPROPRIATING THE CYBER-SPACE

People who knew how to code could create more spaces to fit them and people who found themselves in their discourse. In 2004, Sophie Schmieg was a trans teen in Germany. Most trans women she met were much older than her, not all of which approved of her transitioning at a young age. Because she was convinced other teens felt the same as her, and were not heard, she put together a server, coded a website with a forum, made sure to tweak it for it to accept four gender options instead of the at-the-time usual two, and created a new platform for young trans people: Young-T. Quickly, as young-t.com¹ grew, she made friends and connected with other trans youth in search of spaces to touch and be touched, exchange, and to feel like they belonged.

Other websites, like Open Diary and Live Journal provided more spaces to talk and exchange, and helped people questioning their gender and sexuality.

¹ Barrett-Ibarria, S. (2018). remembering the golden age of the queer internet — I-D.



Welcome page from opendiary.com, 2004

**Open
Diary**

Read life, write life.

womensforum.com
PARTNER

[channels](#)

[top picks](#)

[newsletters](#)

[contests](#)

[interact](#)

[about wvf](#)

Welcome page from opendiary.com, 2004

**Open
Diary**

Read life, write life.

name

password

forget name/password?

find a diary

[open diary mail](#)

[OD reader login](#)

Give the
gift of
OD Plus.

womensforum.com
PARTNER

[channels](#)

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[about wvf](#)

Welcome to The Open Diary...

Open Diary is the original and best online journaling community. We are currently home to 244,070 online diaries.

There are 8,206 diarists online now.

Join Open Diary - When you join Open Diary, you become a member of a thriving community of **thousands** of online diarists. [Click here to start](#) your own FREE diary or blog.

Community News

For updates on what's new at Open Diary, please read The DiaryMaster's latest entries:

- 5/17/2004 [Notes by Person](#) **NEW!**
- 5/11/2004 [Favorites Page Update](#)
- 5/6/2004 [Favorites Page Addendum](#)

Open Diary Cares

This week: Wednesday, May 5th is the **National Day to Prevent Teen Pregnancy**. Please visit [teenpregnancy.org](#) and [take their quiz](#).

Want to see [who's joined OD lately?](#)

Theme of the Week

Every week, our staff picks a theme question for our diarists to write about. This week's question: **Do you have a favorite diarist on Open Diary? Who is it (or who are they)?**

[see this week's theme](#)

Latest Diary Entries

a picture of me..

Just thought i should put a picture up here...so:
..yeah you like...

[Barbara790](#)
15, North Carolina

from Paige...

Time: 3:29 Listening: thoughts in my head
Thinking: My entry isn't as cool as Paige's
Wanting: to make my tummyache go...

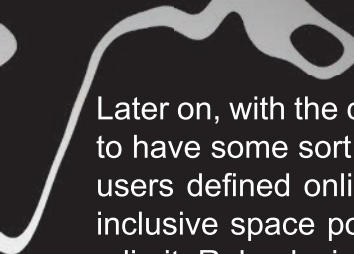
[Candice Melton](#)
22, Oregon

About a Month

Well it's been about a month since I've been back.
Watched three movies in the theater too, but only
one with my boyfriend who got...

[Fallen Angel](#)
25, New York

[Most Recent Entries](#)



Later on, with the creation of Tumblr in 2007, it was made possible to have some sort of unified queer internet culture. Tumblr and its users defined online queer culture by attempting to be the most inclusive space possible, as physical boundaries were no longer a limit. Role playing and persona creation was also popular at the time, and helped the questioning of each's own identity.

Other platforms like fan fiction sharing forums saw a huge part of their users seeking safe and non-censored spaces to create and exchange, writing and reading on topics they felt not comfortable discussing in real life. Fan fiction became a way to explore one's sexual and gender identity, and overall experiment with themselves. Online video games, such as Habbo Hotel, Neopets or World of Warcraft, provided Guilds and semi-private and private discussion spaces. Some had rooms/spaces known to be spaces of exploration for cyber sex, of any nature and (mostly) without kinkshaming or exclusion, (mostly) between consenting people.

The perception by the general public of these Internet communities was not so glamorous and fondly perceived, however. I recall making my first steps in the online world surrounded by very defiant speeches from my surroundings, basically identifying all potential internet friends as potential threats. To live happy, live hidden, as my father would say, and we agreed on not sharing pictures of me, information about where I lived, my real name, etc., in exchange for me being able to use a (mostly) non monitored internet (I was not aware of internet history at the time, but my parents never confronted me on a search I might have made). This led to me creating many fake identities to have more in depth discussions with strangers on various platforms and online games, mostly World of Warcraft. I could be any gender, any age, any sexuality, from any place. Each one of my characters had specificities, and I would sometimes interact with the same people acting like a different persona.



Goldshire Inn on World of Warcraft was a known place for cyb



Inside the Goldshire Inn during a party





Moonguard



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A SPACE WITH PREREQUISITES

When I describe the internet, I am aware of making it seem like an open-for-all space. I am also aware it is not. Accessing the internet has a lot of prerequisites. Accessing the internet freely was, and still is a privilege.

A (fast enough) internet connection, non regulated by parents, guardians or the government, a computer or a mobile device, privacy, time. Being present online is a marker for class we can't ignore. By moving our spaces of conversation, our spaces for touch to spaces with prerequisites, we decide to make those spaces only available to those with means to access them. I believe it would be foolish to present online spaces as an Eldorado for all marginalised and oppressed groups. I would even extend that there is a form of classism in moving spaces of activism on the Internet. As it goes for spaces of education, and spaces of discussion, of meeting.

This is the reason I will not be talking about VR solutions within this thesis. While they enthuse me to the highest point, VR solutions require such expensive technology that it is difficult to consider it a real option for the masses. I just did not have enough resources and people I knew that used them, and I could not consider them a collective experience.

ONLINE, IN SPACE

Growing up sharing a room with my brother, my use of internet and tools I had at my disposal, as privileged as they were (a computer, a webcam, unrestricted fast internet access), was limited. Or not, per se, limited, but would be submitted to my own censorship. What was acceptable to share with my brother; what I was comfortable explaining in case he would ask; and my brother is someone I believe to be open minded. I cannot imagine the struggle and oppression I'd have felt with a more narrow-minded sibling. I remember feeling great frustration at times, needing to leave internet discussions in a hurry, Skype calls, or the quick "cmd+t" shortcut to open a new tab and hide my doings. To this day, I still "cmd+t" whenever I am on the internet and I hear a presence behind me.

When schools had to switch their curriculums from an in-person basis to a zoom or google teams format, some students could not, for various reasons, attend classes. It became very clear then, how moving our interactions to the Internet could alienize even more children and teens from low-income families. In an attempt to tackle that, governments/schools distributed laptops to those in need. Yet, it did not mean they had acquired full liberty on the internet. Internet surfing happens within a context, in an environment. Had I still been living at my parents, sharing a room with my brother, I cannot imagine the struggle of following classes at the same time together. It would be extremely difficult to maintain any form of attention. My brother studying in our bedroom, my mom working in the living room,

me working in my parent's room? Or should we have taken turns to work in our own bedroom?

So in addition to hardware related issues with being able to reach others on the internet comes the issue of the social environment you're evolving in while on the internet.

Yet, despite all the difficulties mentioned regarding access and life on the internet, virtual life felt like the most efficient - and safest - option when the Covid 19 pandemic created unsafe In Real Life (IRL) meeting conditions.

From then on, things as trivial as meeting friends, partying, going to school or going to work had become potentially dangerous for us and our acquaintances. Physical touch was perceived as a vector of disease, and was to be avoided at all cost. In order not to tempt us, governments closed places where touch occurred. Places of leisure, like bars, clubs, cafés, but also any other place which enticed us to gather and be as a group or as communities.

Some spaces had to be replaced fast such as work spaces and educational spaces. If we couldn't go to work, work would come to us. Our computer screens became our window onto the world, and we spent most of the hours we'd spend in the spaces we usually evolve in online, looking through the window.

When time passed and perspectives of finding our meeting spaces quickly grew slimmer, communities had to find space online for leisure too. First it was bars. I remember seeing invitations on facebook for "un apéro" on zoom and thinking it was a bit odd, and frankly, not warm. Not feeling like we'd get used to it. Not believing we could grow desperate enough for contact to start playing pretend at a bar on the web. But soon enough, these online spaces grew on me. The more I encountered them, the more organised and interested they would seem. I felt they were becoming somewhat relevant to the situation, and slowly proving a not too bad ersatz social environment. I remember the moment at which I thought:

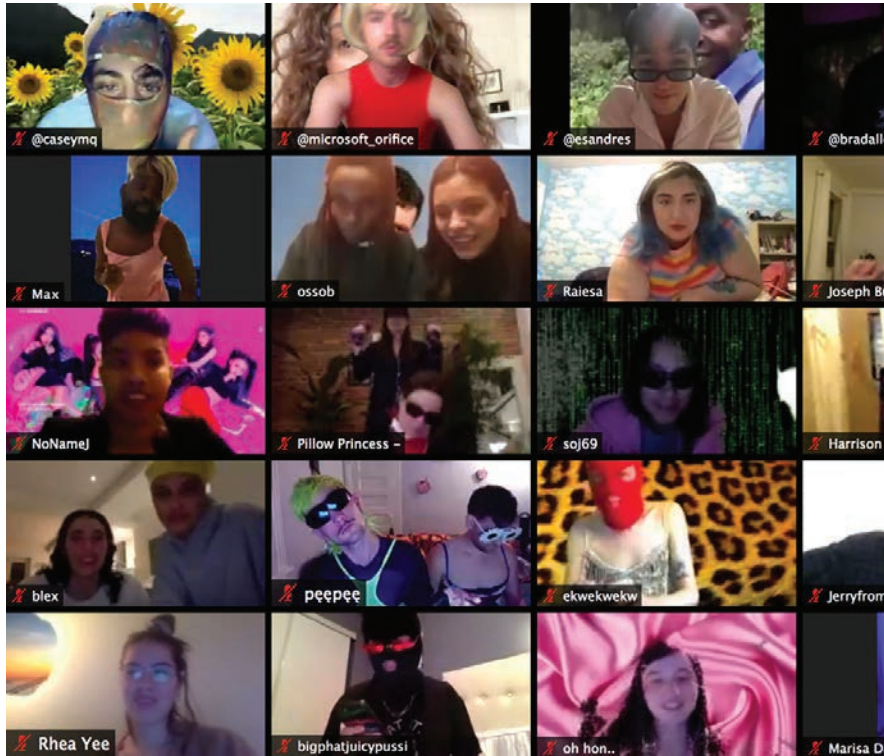
“This could be an alternative”. This was after April 4th and Charli XCX’s surprise party on Club Quarantine². The website, whom I had heard mentioned here and there on the internet is, as its name would suggest, an online club, there to fill the void left by the closing of clubs around the planet. Seeing the videos online the day after, and the level of devotion to the party people attending her gig showed, I felt positive again. People dressed up, danced, and were involving themselves in the party. It was not a meeting of couch people listening to music curled up in a blanket. It was an enthusiastic crowd!

All was not lost. And maybe zoom was not such a bad option, after all.





Moran, J. (2020, April 4). Charli XCX
Virtual DJ Set With the "Maca



Opened Her Surprise
arena." PAPER



PARTYING ONLINE

What followed was a series of interesting events, all offering various takes on what partying in the spring of 2020 could look like. One of these events in particular struck my attention because of its format. Organised on April 24th was Square Garden, a Minecraft festival hosted by alternative electronic music duo 100 Gecs³.

It wasn't the duo's first attempt at a Minecraft⁴ festival. In 2018, before quarantine was a constraint to nightlife, they performed their first live show ever as a duo at Coalchella, a Minecraft Coachella. In 2019 was also organised Fire Festival, a spoof Fyre festival, on Minecraft again, at which they performed. It was only normal they'd organise one themselves in turn.

The festival was free to enter, although participants could donate according to their means to a fundraiser for nonprofit Feeding America, making the only prerequisite to enter being able to connect to the internet at the time of the event.

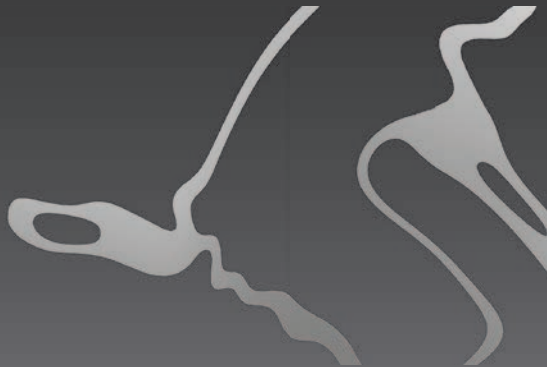
Shows consisted of DJ sets from each artist, playing their songs, released and unreleased, remixes, other tracks they liked, with the occasional live talking to the crowd. It differed the regular DJ and live set in the way the audience and the artists interacted. With a regular audience, the interaction limits itself to an artist talking to a loud, overwhelming crowd, in which singular voices cannot be isolated, unless the artist really tries to talk to someone in particular, gives them a microphone, gets them on stage. On Minecraft, the instant chat allowed for the crowd to not only react to the show and the casual jokes dropped here and there, but also ask things to the artists, request songs, etc...

³ Rodgers, G. (2020). What We Can Learn from "Square Garden," the 100 Gecs Headlined Minecraft Music Festival— Afterglow.

⁴ Minecraft is a sandbox video game developed by Mojang. It is a block based survival/creative game. It is the most downloaded game of all time, with over 200 million copies sold.

This peaked when due to really high demand, Charli XCX interrupted her set at Square Garden to play her unreleased but leaked track, "Taxi". Despite not being in the same venue physically, most fans had never been as close to their favorite musical artists as they were in Minecraft. The playfulness induced by the blocky world and informal interface, coupled with the ease of communication got the audience touched by artists, despite all being quarantined in their homes, watching concerts through both a literal and metaphorical window on their computer, unbound by a physical presence at a venue.

The proximity with fans didn't stop there, and the duo organised another show, with more of an affect intention this time. Partnering with UC Berkeley and student run non-profit Superb, Votechella (yet another pun on Coachella), 100 Gecs attempted to create a voter information center / concert hall less than a month before the 2020 United States presidential election. Playing live and DJing, with interruptions to interact with the crowd, answer political and non political questions, and share platforms to find more voter information, essentially creating a forum of interactions in the midst of a rather confusing period of time. Reaching to each other, all could empathise on the situation, voice their feelings, and not feel alone.



100 Geecs' Square Garden
poster and line-up



100 Geecs' Square Garden poster and line-up



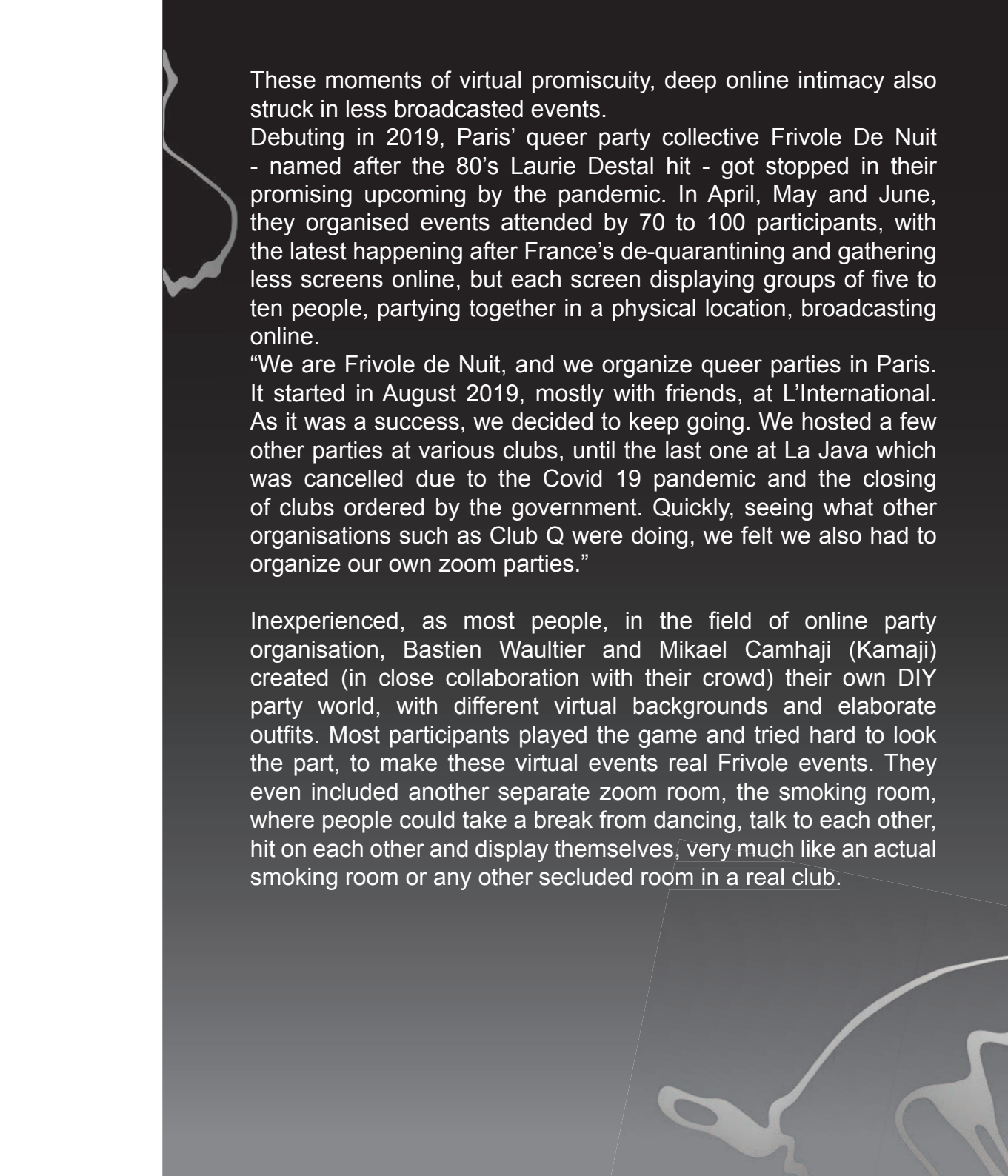


et in Minecraft

coalchella's set in Minecraft

Coalchella's set in Minecraft





These moments of virtual promiscuity, deep online intimacy also struck in less broadcasted events.

Debuting in 2019, Paris' queer party collective Frivole De Nuit - named after the 80's Laurie Dostal hit - got stopped in their promising upcoming by the pandemic. In April, May and June, they organised events attended by 70 to 100 participants, with the latest happening after France's de-quarantining and gathering less screens online, but each screen displaying groups of five to ten people, partying together in a physical location, broadcasting online.

“We are Frivole de Nuit, and we organize queer parties in Paris. It started in August 2019, mostly with friends, at L'International. As it was a success, we decided to keep going. We hosted a few other parties at various clubs, until the last one at La Java which was cancelled due to the Covid 19 pandemic and the closing of clubs ordered by the government. Quickly, seeing what other organisations such as Club Q were doing, we felt we also had to organize our own zoom parties.”

Inexperienced, as most people, in the field of online party organisation, Bastien Waultier and Mikael Camhaji (Kamaji) created (in close collaboration with their crowd) their own DIY party world, with different virtual backgrounds and elaborate outfits. Most participants played the game and tried hard to look the part, to make these virtual events real Frivole events. They even included another separate zoom room, the smoking room, where people could take a break from dancing, talk to each other, hit on each other and display themselves, very much like an actual smoking room or any other secluded room in a real club.

Frivole de nuit archives, photography by Sofiya Loriashvili, 2019

Frivole de nuit archives, photography by Sofiya Loriashvili, 2019






e Nuit URL 3rd edition poster presented as instagram mosaic,
2020



A huge difference I felt between those events and usual club events, is how much influence the crowd had. The visual identity of the party was left a lot more into the hands of the crowd, divided in individual windows, as they were showing their place, or a virtual background, but essentially, each curating the space they'd evolve in.

With any open event on the internet, especially queer events, trolls were to be expected, and La Frivole URL were no exception. It called for a curation of the crowd, by Bastien and Kamaji, which occurred by different means than during their real life parties. Instead of having people at the door, making sure each person that was coming together was aware of the safe space, queer character of each party, they had to monitor closely the behaviour of their participants, and identify behaviours, language but also guessing who was underage and who wasn't, as nudity might occur on camera. As organisers, they still had the responsibility of making sure everyone was safe and unharmed, be it harmed by speech and online behaviour this time, with the difference than instead of explaining at the door to a group that "tonight wasn't gonna do it", they could just right click on the window of the user within zoom, and ban them from the event. Indeed, with such ease of rejection came a few incidents, and a few of their friends / serious attenders got banned when a larger group of people attempted to crash the event.

"During previous editions, I (Bastien) would be at the door to make sure all came in aware that this was a queer oriented party, and to try to curate the attendance of the party. On zoom, it was different, as I had to watch how people would behave within their individual window, and on the chat. During the first edition, we had a few but not so many trolls, and they were dealt with fairly fast. During our second edition, we got raided by a large group of trolls, who came and shared very offensive messages on the chat, and acting up on camera. That was a lot more chaotic, as the number was bigger. We had to close the entrance to the event and ban them all while making sure the party wouldn't stop. By accident, a few people

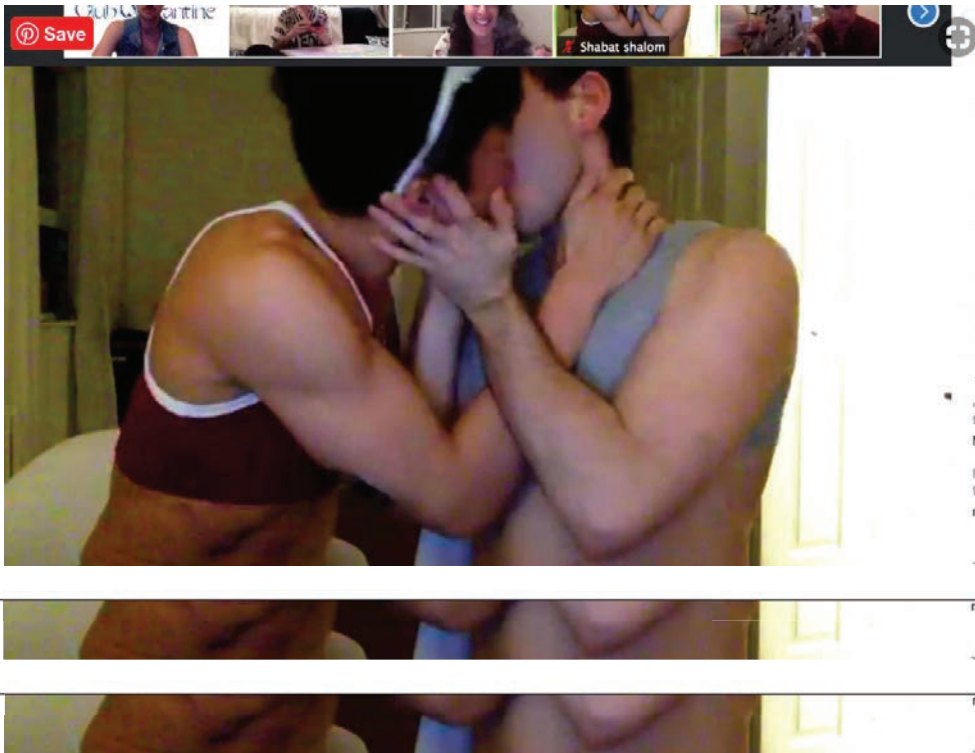


who were safe and here to enjoy the party got kicked, and on zoom if you've been banned, it's not possible to come back to the event. There are both pros and cons to these tools of moderation, it was easy to get rid of problematic people but it could lead to mistakes in the heat of the moment. At the time of the second edition, we wanted to host more parties, and viewed these first two as "crash tests", to see how to handle it, make mistakes that wouldn't happen later on. We had never done it, so there had to be issues"

Despite those issues and the "crash test" character of their first and second edition, things went overall well, the music was amazing, the outfits crazy, the dance hard, and they held later on in the event, when the crowd was more intimate, a "best slut" dancing contest, where participants gave their all to give the best dances in front of their webcams. It was a success.

The third edition, held in June was a bit different. It was held in the first weekend of the end of quarantine in France. There were less participants on the zoom event (40-50), but most of the participants were in medium sized groups partying at home with their friends while being live streamed on the event through their computer camera. The event I was at was held at Caroline Drieu's apartment in Barbès, Paris. We were 10 people, dressed by Clothilde Grace's graduation project, Le Bal des Folles. The party inside the apartment was covered by multiple webcams streaming on the zoom event, placed in different parts of the house which usually hold different moments of the party. The living room was the main room, the kitchen the typical anti-party hangout, the bedroom the quieter place for more private conversations.

Unidentified couple making out on camera, Club Q Zoom Party, 2020



“During the first and second edition, people were at home with not more than two people living together on screen. Since there was nothing else to do, not much to focus the attention on and it was a new format, people attending showed more enthusiasm to party on screen with others partying on screen. When the quarantine ended in France, we had our third edition which gathered a lot less people on screen, but most would have three, five, up to ten people using the same screen. After three months of quarantine, people’s attention was more focused on their guests, on being with them rather than sharing the experience through the screen, which is normal. It felt less intimate and special, though.”

Dance contests were still held within the zoom event, and the entire coverage of the house kept us linked to the event throughout the night, but I must admit after not attending any party since January, I was more focused on my surroundings and being with people. But the high-quality curation of DJs and handling of the night by Frivole made it a very special party nonetheless, which does not come close to any recent house party or club/rave party I have attended. I can say without doubt that this night had been one of the moments I had felt the most touched in 2020.

“We rely on people’s motivation to exist. In spring and early summer, there was a lot of enthusiasm. We thought it would only last until the summer, then the end of summer. When France went back to quarantine in fall, the energy was different. The enthusiasm for this new medium was a bit gone, both for the attenders and for us. We feel a bit done with the format, reached the limit. It does not replace real life. People spend all their time on zoom, work on zoom, study on zoom, but also in their rooms. We understand the will to party is a bit gone at that point.”

Sadly, there has not been another Frivole since.



WHAT WE MEAN BY TOUCH

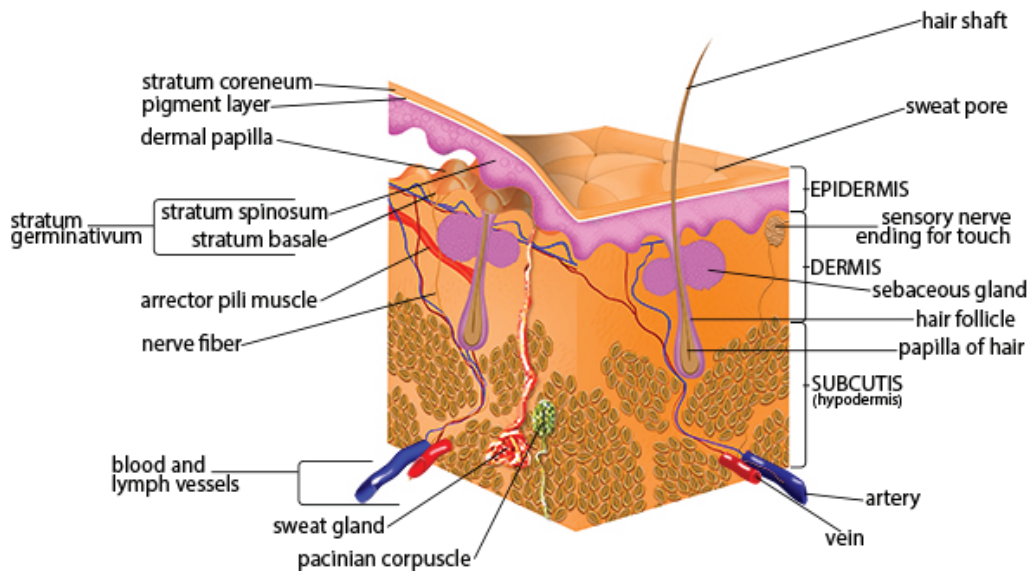
I have always had a special relationship with touch. Being very obsessive with touching things, also with various parts of my body. There are so many sensations to explore within touch. Warmth, softness, sharp edges. Touching objects recurrently was a way of relieving stress and anxiety for me. With my fingertips, but with my philtrum, and my cheeks, and many other places that felt calming.

THE BODY

Of all five senses touch is peculiar in many ways. First, it is the only one not confined to one part of our body. Smelling has the nose, seeing has the eye, tasting the tongue, hearing the ear, but touching, while having identifiable positions, is everywhere. We feel more or less depending on the location, we shut down some parasite and unfocusing sensations (how annoying would it be to all day feel our shirt rub against our backs), but touch, all over our body, is present and active. Touch could simply be described as a modality, from lots of receptors all over the skin, and lots of nerve endings, all situated at different depths, in different concentrations depending on the location, sending information to the brain about pressure, temperature, pain, movement. Touch regulates our balance, allows us to remain standing, to walk. It situates us in space, allows us to know the direction of the wind, how cold it is. Touch gives our brain testimony of our existence within the physical world.

Touch is also the most resilient of senses. It reconstructs, as sensitivity can be lost but can come back. It barely changes with age, where hearing, seeing, tasting and smelling tend to do dull with years accumulating. It is hard to trick, and very difficult for the brain to acknowledge being tricked on. When lost, it is mostly lacking in one area, letting the rest of the body feel. It even influences other senses, as tasting involves texture, and feeling a texture we had only seen brings detail to the eye.

✕ Drawing of our skin's layers, with nerve endings at the upper part of the Dermis



THE LOWEST OF THE SENSES

In western cultures, especially when consulting classical philosophers, we notice a deep ocularcentrism. Ocularcentrism is the propension to perceive the idea of sight as better, ranking it over other senses. We believe things once we see with our own eyes, we see when we understand. Do you see what I mean?

Even in language, most omit the second part of the popular sentence I quoted at the beginning of this thesis, Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth, settling for a shorter and infinitely more ocularcentric "Seeing is believing". I believe what I see.

With the uncontested primacy of sight comes a diminished position of touch. In *De Anima*, Aristotle, rates touch to be the "lowest" of all senses. In an attempt to rank senses, he explains that while sight relates to the spiritual, to elevated state of mind, touch is more basic, relates more to our animal properties. Ficino, later, talking about the ways we love, develops that while touch transmits a very carnal and basic form of love, close to what animals feel, sight is a higher, more spiritual and intense form of love. Odd, when Diderot, in 1749, writes in the letter to the blind "And I found that of all the senses, the eye was the most superficial, the ear the most haughty, smell the most voluptuous and inconstant, and touch the most profound and philosophical".

Diderot is saddened by the treatment of hands in classic philosophy, despised for their materialism, and situates the touch in the realm of earthy condition, of reality. Later in the letter to the blind, he makes the blind mathematician declare on his deathbed that "if you wish me to believe in God, let me touch him" (how Saint Thomas of him), fixing even more the idea of a primacy of touch - only proof acceptable of the divine, and defying the Ocularcentrism we mentioned earlier.

A Russian dictionary⁵ describes touch as “The synthesis of all other senses”: “Soundwaves touch the eardrum, photons touch the cornea, molecules hit sensors in the nose, sensors in the mouth. Touch is first and necessary to all those senses.” Yet, while we touch and feel things, all the time, barely anything touches us. Let me elaborate.

ELECTRONS AND THE NEVER TOUCHING TOUCH PARADOX

Imagine two solid objects. They are in a void; no gravity or air friction. The only force applied to them is a constant, equal and linear force driving them into each other. The gap between them is getting smaller and smaller, and smaller. They are about to collide.

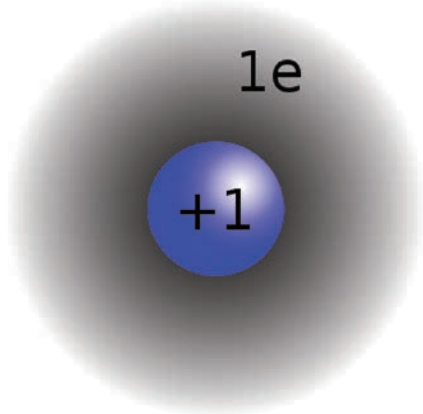
When the two objects in the void collide, they press against each other, equally. Soon, we will notice the matter constituting our two objects is changing. It is deforming. It moves, expands in one direction, and in the other. The tension within the matter will become too strong, and a crack will appear, and another one, until one of the objects - or both - breaks. The matter which constitutes them will be separated, two pieces of the same object of the same material. The bond of the atoms constituting the matter will have been broken.

When we look at coherent matter, we know it is composed of molecules, attached together. These molecules are made of atoms that bond together. Atoms themselves are constituted of a nucleus, an ensemble of positively charged particles called protons, and neutrally charged particles called neutrons; and, gravitating around are electrons, charged negatively. When two atoms are attached together to create molecules to create matter, the bond is called a covalent bond.

Example of a covalent

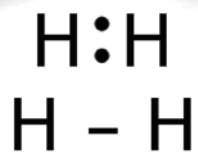
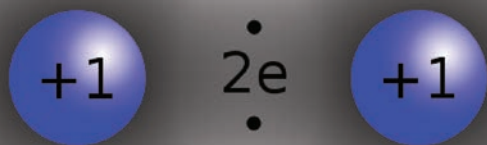


Example of a



a covalent bond

Example of a covalent bond



What happens in a covalent bond is that atoms come together, and react together, and start sharing their electrons. These atoms are no longer single. They have formed a connection between each other, which is hard to break, because of the balance of positive and negative charges, and the exchange of negative charges between the two atoms. These bonded atoms create a molecule, which bonds with other molecules in the same way. Electrons travel freely from one atom to the other, from one molecule to the other (keep in mind this is a very simplified model of matter, precise enough to introduce concepts about touch, as this is not an essay on atomic structure of matter).

When our two objects collide, crack, and break, the force from one object on the other was so strong, the bond keeping its matter, its molecules together were no longer strong enough to keep the matter coherent, whole. It could not sustain the pulls and tensions exerted on its electrons any longer, so it ruptured.

But the surface of transfer of force from one object to the other was not a surface of contact. There was, in fact, no contact between our objects. Between them was both a void, a total absence of matter, but a very interaction-rich area. See, particles can bond, or more generally react and interact in different ways. We mentioned the covalent bond, but there also exists the ionic bond, which is when a negatively charged particle bonds with a positively charged particle.

Think of a magnet. + and - really like each other, and really want to stick together. They attract each other. But like with the two negative poles of a magnet (or two positive poles) two particles with the same polarity really don't like each other. They fully repulse each other, never making contact. The same thing happened with our objects. They pushed on each other. They destroyed each other, tore their own matter, without even actually touching each other.

When we touch people, we experience the same phenomenon. All the touch we experience, throughout our lives, is nothing but repulsion of electromagnetic fields. Contact is just repulsion, and when we reach for touch, we are just relentlessly reaching yet never touching⁶.

The last and only person anyone has ever touched is actually their own mother, up until their umbilical cord was cut. From this point on, we remained untouched. However we do leave traces of our touch. Dead skin cells, sebum, hairs, fingerprints, sweat. So many ways our touch is singular to us. Singular enough to protect our phones, banking apps, our personal data, to convict us for murder. Whenever we touch, whatever we touch, even if we actually never make contact with its molecules, a trace will remain. The touch subject will remember. We remember touch. It is intimate, it is close, and it affects.

TOUCH AND ITS MODALITIES OVER MOOD

Touch is affect. A slight graze from someone may make you smile, bubbling with happiness, or in contrary, will get your hair stand up, even petrify you.

In our modern use of language, touching, being touched, touching others not only relates to the idea of our outer layer of electrons repulsing someone else's outer layer of electron, but a much deeper connection. It means feeling, as a group. Feeling empathy, identifying. "I was touched by this speech", because I related, I felt included. It spoke to me, to my feelings. I was left not feeling alone in my experience of this phenomenon. In the same way a warm hug, a caress, a tight hand can make us feel many things, like included, words can too.

In the same way touch deprivation happens when nerves receive an underwhelming amount of contact for too long, one can feel deprived of symbolic touch too.

REPLACING TOUCH BY INFLUENCING MATTER

THINKING ABOUT SANDING

Online partying is not the only way I touched and felt touched during the quarantined times. Spending my months of March, April and June living and working in France's countryside, at the Studio Orta - Les moulins for design duo Ortamiklos, I spent most of my time there making things in their workshops. While the world was stopping or going slower, we had deadlines to meet and objects to produce. Most of the objects we did were made from rough materials we would refine by hand to reach the right shape, the right curves, and the right feeling to the hand. Despite working with harsh-to-the-skin materials (fiberglass and resins, cardboard pulp, concrete), these phases of refinement required constant hand to material contact, gloveless. The longest stretches of work would involve hand sanding with grit 500 or 1000 pieces that were between stages of painting and varnishing, where the eye does not see imperfections anymore. My sight was making me default, but at these moments I could always count on my hands. There is an amazing property to our touch sensitivity, that we can feel changes with our fingertips in a texture and a material at a scale as tiny as 13 nanometers. With the eye's 0.1 millimeter limit (100000 nm), my fingers would notice details ten thousand times tinier than the very limit of what my eye could possibly see. Not only would I notice details, unpleasant feelings to the hand, but I could feel where I had already sanded and where I hadn't, which would never have been possible with my bare eyes, or while wearing gloves. I could feel my former presence, by how smooth the surface was. I was making the surface more and more pleasant to me, while getting more and more intimate with the object. The constant repetitive motion and overwhelming sensory stimulation was putting me in a

state of trance, where all that would matter would be reaching the smoothest surface, making the object the most pleasant possible, its shape irresistible and to generate the same obsession for the next person feeling this as I felt it myself.

These moments of deep caressing and intense contact with objects replaced all my romantic and friendly skin to skin interactions. I was learning not to know living bodies, but inanimate objects. I grew to like this process, and created an intense connection with the works I used these methods on. They became closer to me, I had feelings about them.

CAROLINE DRIEU, FULL-CONTACT CERAMICS

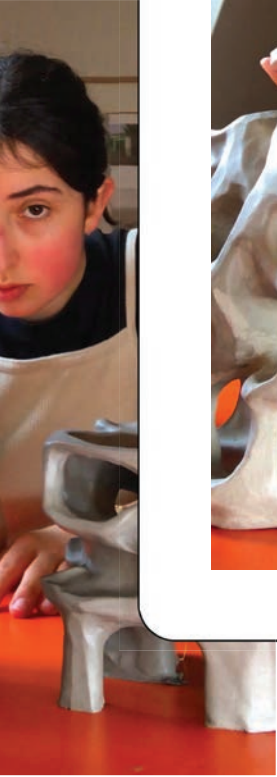
I talked with my friend Caroline Drieu, an Artist from France currently living in Paris about it. She made a series of ceramic sculptures I was very sensible to, “Everytime we touch”, but also held a daily “podcast” in the format of private instagram stories throughout the entirety of France’s first quarantine, discussing various topics ranging from art to social issues, to personal feelings and dealing with quarantine. These stories provided key elements that started my reflexion about topics of this thesis.



Caroline Drieu and her
sculptures, 2020



Caroline Drieu and her
sculptures, 2020



“I am Caroline Drieu, an Artist based in Paris. I moved to Paris to study fashion at Duperré school. During my studies I mostly did sculpture and ceramics, as my interest grew about those practices by hanging at the ceramic workshop of the school. After I graduated, I took on a long internship with Hugo Servanin. He was working in a space with the means to keep working with ceramics, so I kept on working with the medium. What I liked about clay is that it is a living material. It can be molded, shaped, you maintain a relationship with it. I love working with it, and the feeling on my hands it procures when I shape it, but I also found out that when my ceramics were cooked, I loved to find ways to connect them to my body, see how the curves match. Hug them, even. At first I was only attempting to make objects to hold, by playing with textures. But they morphed into objects to hug, to embrace.

Quickly, I started having my friends touch them when they would come over, or during after parties at my place. A pretty good anecdote about my relationship with my sculptures is, every time I was flirting with a girl, there would be a moment where they'd hug my ceramic sculptures, before even hugging me. My sculptures would be this buffer zone, an interface for contact and a vector of my touch.”

I often think about the owners of these objects. People who bought Caroline's works, or furniture from Ortamiklos. Do they know about the deep connection that occurred? Do they feel it? How do they feel when they caress their chairs, desks, sculptures? I wonder if they can grow as close to their objects.

“My sculpture can only reach this state of huggable objects when I clearly express they are. Because they are sculptures and seen as such, people are reluctant to touch or caress them, let alone hug them. I have stopped making ceramics at the moment, to work on that aspect, how to make it clearer for viewers that they're made for contact. I cannot always be near them to explain to people that they should manipulate them. I don't want to compromise my shapes or change them too much to make them more explicitly touchable, either.”

By its position as an art piece, the art piece which aimed at questioning touch alienates itself from touch. It is something I never wondered about, as I was working with design, with pieces that were meant to live alongside their users, that are not expected to be displayed and watched from a safe distance. Because touch is so intimate and personal, we sometimes take distance from what is supposed to be touched.

But those experiences of collective touching, we generate collective experiences. We create settings for all to enjoy, in any temporality. Whenever anyone touches those objects they are reminded of our presences, of our actions, but also grounding themselves by experiencing what others have felt.

Because when I was making, my hand, in an almost god-complex way, was directly affecting the object, its future. Each stroke had a determining influence on the shape, on the feel the object would transmit. Do the owners feel that? Do owners have a sense of presence, feel my hand answering their touch, or am I just elaborating stories because I do not want my touch, my affect on the objects I have made which weren't mine to be meaningless? Because I do not want my touch to be meaningless. I think my touch, like all other forms of touch from anybody else, is special. I want it to be recognized. I want my affect on people to have meaning, to make sense at the moment it reaches whomever it reaches. Otherwise, isn't touch wasted, when no answer, no reaction is coming back from my actions?

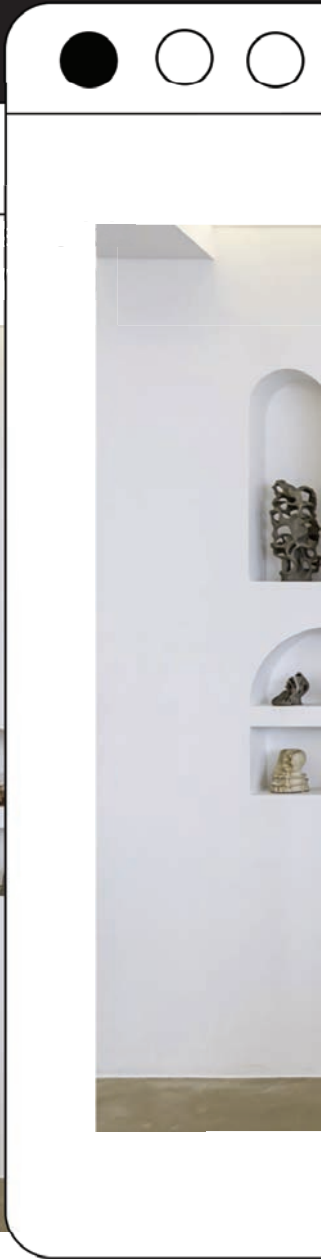
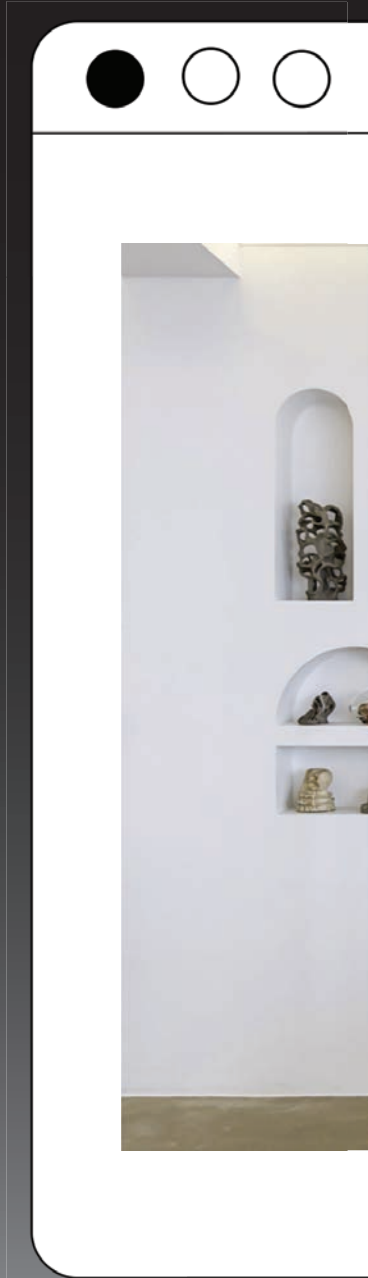
Caroline resting on a glazed ceramic piece, 2020



“When the serie was exhibited at Chapelle XIV, visitors of course weren’t touching the pieces. They were displayed in little alcoves carved in the wall which are cute, but also showing only one side of each sculpture, and separating them from the space and the viewers. The health situation didn’t help either. Maybe it would have been interesting to hold a workshop or something around the exhibition to teach how to touch again, to have some group sculpture touching, I don’t know...”

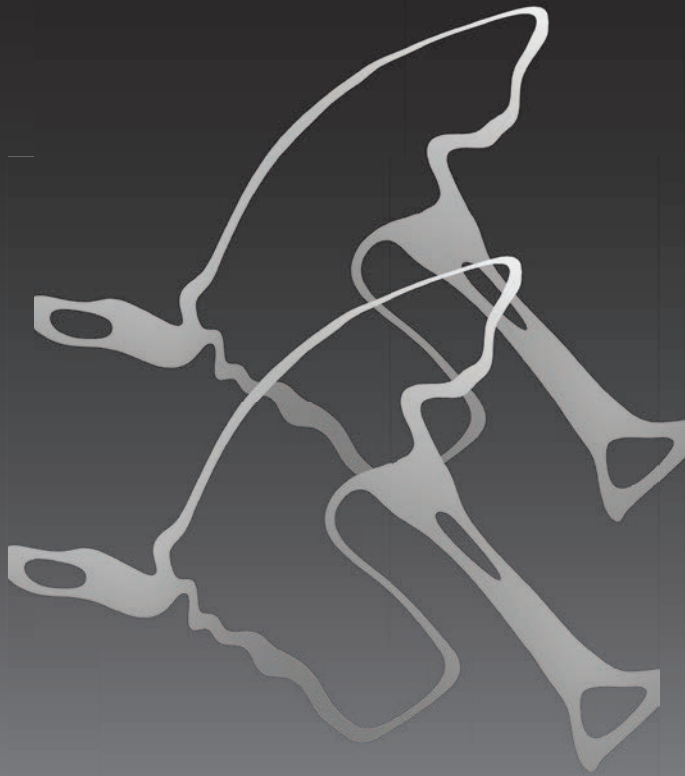
It is too bad my questioning on touch and its alternatives comes at a time where it is so difficult to compare. Because we have no other solutions, we experiment, we come up with makeshift alternatives. I wish the situation to change quickly so that we can experiment with crossing these solutions we used in this moment of emergency, and by blending them try to achieve a post human touch, a touch that is both situated within reality but enhanced by technology, and by our reflexions on what is touch and what the conditions of touch are.





Caroline Drieu's work in
Chapelle XIV, 2020





CONCLUSION

In this thesis I attempted to make a summary of my own reflexions on touch. What started with both a sensory stimulation and social contact deprivation led me to experiment with various mediums of touch which I would never have had if my access to touch had never been compromised. It also led me to question possibilities. Affordances. What it means to have the means to access other environments of socialising.

All of my experimentation and interrogations on touch came from the world around me trying to cope with the loss of touch, and the loss of affect from touch. This thesis is an attempt at thinking about touch by looking at the most direct ways society has replaced its regular touching methods, to think about possibilities to enhance our experience of touching once we can fully touch again. I do not believe any of the alternatives I mentioned in this thesis are long term solutions. They all have their limits and all lack some dimension of touch. I believe however, that they represent interesting additions to our usual touch experience. The third edition of *Frivole de nuit* is, for me, very representative of that phenomenon. Entirely on zoom it still retained a slightly sad tone, with its participants locked up inside. Without the connection, it had been, as pleasant as it is, a regular house party - well dressed however, thanks to Clothilde Grace. With the combination of the two, something extra happened. Maybe, by crossing the sources of touch we can more regularly achieve these blissful moments of extreme touch, and refine our relationship with touching.

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REMERCIEMENTS

Bastien Waultiez, Mikael Camhaji,
Caroline Drieu,
Gosha Woch, Nejla Imanzadeh,
Nathan Howe,
every DJ involved in Zoom Parties I attended,
every participant of Zoom parties I attended,
Arif Kornweitz.

Graphic Design: Louise de Viry