Touch & Feel in the Digital Age
Post Editorial

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Editorial – July 20, 2020

Touch & Feel in the Digital Age **is a substantive and interdisciplinary study into how we feel and touch in our technologically mediated, dematerialized digital cultures and how this is expressed in our social and artistic practices. The original idea was to investigate through a series of essays and artist contributions what kind of underlying structures, powers and forces are currently active, which regulate our experiences of feel and touch in the digital domain, in a technological, biopolitical and ontological sense. We were particularly concerned with the strategies, interests and monopoly positions of the major commercial media and technology companies and with the relationship and implications of touch media and technology to the body and physical space. How can ubiquitous haptic technology and media be critically questioned, tested and put into practice from experimental theory, art and design?**

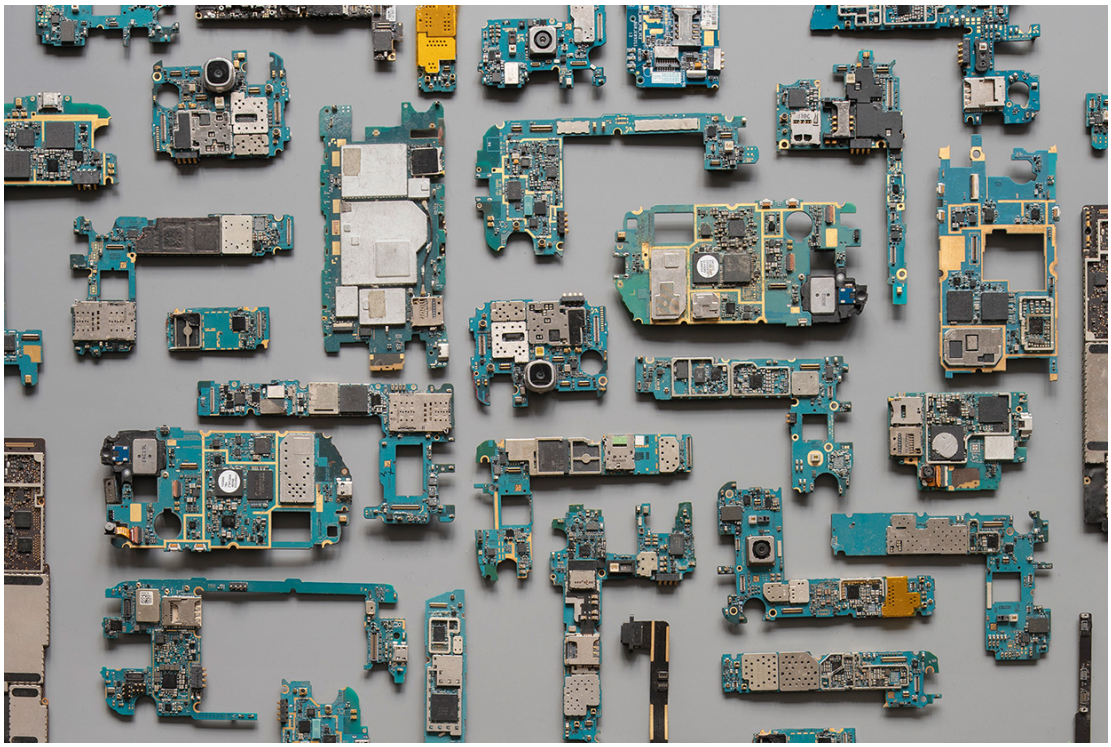


Image: Mind Design

The first impetus for the project *[www.onlineopen.org/topologies-of-touch-lexicon]* came in 2018–2019, when we could not yet imagine that the world would face a highly contagious

virus that would take the form of a pandemic and give a whole new dimension to problematizing touch. In 2018, it was inconceivable that government-imposed lockdowns on citizens would take place, and that we would be subject to strict guidelines in the area of human touch and interaction. At the time of this writing in 2020, we live in a world in which social distancing and physical distancing are the rules and in which there is a blemish on touch. All this has our research topic made even more urgent, but at the same time vastly more difficult because we are in the middle of a new situation and hardly have an idea of the consequences on a political, social and personal level.

In any case, the digital imperative has only become more compelling since the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19. To make life and work somehow continue, we are more than ever in the virtual domain of the Internet. With Jitsi, Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom, and Teams and our social media, we seem to have plenty of haptic experiences. However, our new virtual condition has been mainly imposed on us: the digital is no longer simply an extension or enrichment of our physical, carnal and material lives – insofar as it was – but rather complicates it. It is inevitable that our personal and public lives, and thus the underlying power structures, will be affected. We see an increase in government control, violence, poverty and inequity, and can now only speculate about the influence of a deadly virus and a flight in the virtual for the experience of our own body and that of others. Paul B. Preciado said of our new condition: "Screens are the new skin of the world", and "Machines have more presence than any bodies that are here today".[1] We can only imagine what this means.

Some of the pieces published here had been already completed before the Covid-19 crisis, some have been revised to reflect the situation or have been rewritten. In light of all this, this editorial is primarily an 'interim report' of work in progress. For this research project, it means that it is currently incomplete, that it has gaps and must be continued – although each contribution in itself is valuable and urgent.

Looking for liberation from the dominance of the data body, art historian and media theorist Kris Paulsen's essay 'Flesh in the Machine *[www.onlineopen.org/flesh-in-the-machine]*' delves into to the fantasy of bodiless space to see how our bodies were pulled into that place – as biometric data, as geo-spatial coordinates, as information fueling a neo-phrenology that seeks not to eliminate the biases hung upon the physical body but to automate their application. How might we make visible our fleshy capture in immaterial space? 'What we need now are exorcize machines', Paulsen asserts. In her article, she reflects on this with references to particular works of Mendi and Keith Obadike, Zach Blas, James Bridle, Critical Art Ensemble, Tega Brain and Surya Mattu.

'Detour World *[www.onlineopen.org/detour-world]*' by artist Constant Dullaart contains the tactility of a digital map, nostalgically planning a route we have traveled before. With restricted international travel because of the Covid-19 pandemic, these dreams of walking the planet take place in a different light.

In 'Dreaming and Doing Haptics *[www.onlineopen.org/dreaming-and-doing-haptics]*' media archeologist David Parisi reflects on the potential dangers of new haptic devices, in particular Apple's Taptic Machine and the TESLASUIT: who has access to and control of the tactile data that haptic technologies capture, store, and transmit? What new violence will be inflicted against bodies?

Jan Robert Leegte's internet artwork 'Drop Shadow *[www.onlineopen.org/drop-shadow]*' uses facial recognition to evoke formal responses through mirroring. It is deployed to formally mirror you with an intangible object, namely an element of the standard interface, resulting in an interactive sculpture that alludes to the real-time presence of the interface surface and the deeper systems behind it.

In 'Machine Diagnosis *[www.onlineopen.org/machine-diagnosis]*' Ramon Amaro signals traces of political arithmetic thought in government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Amaro goes into the wider implications of human quantification and data consolidation and asserts that Covid-19 analysis tools, vaccine research, and detection devices risk leaving open future gaps in data privacy, while also centralizing the patient data into government forecasting efforts.

The sound piece 'Lorem Siri *[www.onlineopen.org/lorem-siri]*' by JODI penetrates the interior of voice applications such as Siri and Alexa, that can be 'touched' by the human voice. Siri and Alexa are supposed to assist in dealing with the ubiquity of information societies. Or is that we, as users and consumers, serve them and the powerful media companies from which they originate?

Jort van der Laan's video work 'Licking the Sky, Embracing the Shadow of a Fish in a Glance Upon the Surface *[www.onlineopen.org/licking-the-sky-embracing-the-shadow-of-a-fish-in-a-glance-upon-the-surface]*' pairs an Iroha poem reading echoed with footage of a grey parrot and more abstract imagery to form a short handheld observation of intimacy and care, and to auraticly bridge feel and touch, screen and skin.

In 'The Zombie Public: Or, How to Revive 'the Public' and Public Space After the Pandemic *[www.onlineopen.org/the-zombie-public]*' Eric Kluitenberg observes how the media is flooded with projections of futures with or without 'the virus'. Instead of writing these scenarios off as nonsensical, they should be understood as what they are: ideological projections that attempt to shape rather than predict possible futures. Who is 'shaping'? Under what prerogative? In service of which ideological a-priori? Serving which material (political / economic) interests?

The essays by Willem van Weelden and Renan Laru-an will be published in September.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Footnotes

1. See notes by Mike Hoolboom from a talk by Paul B. Preciado at Glad Day Bookshop, Toronto, January 22, 2020, launching *An Apartment on Uranus*, mikehoolboom.com.

Crosslinks

Topologies of Touch: www.onlineopen.org/topologies-of-touch-lexicon
Flesh in the Machine: www.onlineopen.org/flesh-in-the-machine
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Tags

Affect, Media Society

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