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The Power of Touch

This journey about touch that I am going to take you on, started with a subject that you might not expect.

Masculinity - in all its wonder, mystery and boundaries - has fascinated me for ages. Over two years ago, after my graduation project on the male nude, I'd resolved to dive deeper into a specific area of masculinity: touch - or the lack thereof. There was one question that remained with me for years - why is touch such a taboo subject for men? In the West, especially the Netherlands, touch seems far less free for men than for women.

Why is it so normal for women to touch or even kiss each other while men who do the same are labeled 'gay', 'soft' or 'weak'? Where do these different interpretations of similar gestures come from?

I needed to explore this further. My journey began with asking two men (who currently do nude

1.
BY
Bibi -Joan
(ARTIST)

modelling) to join my project exploring male touch. I started with photography but soon realised that video would be a better medium. I deliberately didn't research the topic before exploring it with them - I wanted us to explore it in isolation; away from any additional influence that the research might've had. So I started filming. I had them touch each other's hands, faces and backs. I had started this project in 2020, but I got stuck. Due to the corona pandemic, I had to put all my projects on hold - as 'touch' became taboo everywhere and among everyone.

During that time I met my current boyfriend, Ruan. We fell in love, but not in the usual way. We didn't speak each other's language. A lot of people were surprised by this. How can you be in a relationship if you can't communicate? This personal experience gave me a new perspective on connection. I realised that you can connect without talking, if you are open to it. I sometimes sat with Ruan in a restaurant where we couldn't say much without using a translating tool. Most people give up by then and although I understand it, it is a pity. Firstly, because apparently we can no longer enjoy being together in silence. Secondly, because some people are not verbally strong, or simply don't speak the same verbal language as someone who they could potentially have a once-in-a-lifetime

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you and pet you on the shoulder. That has a totally different impact. And the other thing I learned is that touch has a strong link with empathy. What personally intrigues me, and I am still researching this, is how touch affects our behavior. It is really hard to measure through art works. How do you know if touch is really changing the behavior of people? There is research on this topic, for example, that clients are more inclined to buy or to listen to you when you are touching the client while discussing the product. Because they feel a stronger connection with you. So you are changing the behavior of this person by touching the person. I created this staircase piece covering the handrails that was in Mediamatic for a whole year. The idea was mainly to create this moment of surprise and to break this routine moment of walking down the stairs and to give this small brain stimulation. Surprisingly I got the strongest reactions when I took it down. People were getting upset and started calling me. One of these people said, "Margherita, I have been dreaming about it every night since you took it down. I keep dreaming of touching it". This really surprised me. What does this mean? I have a scientific background, so I am currently asking myself, how do you use these learnings and findings of the artworks scientifically to grow our knowledge of touch?

B:

You mentioned the link between touch and empathy, can you tell more about that?

M:

I always say that the work I make comes alive when someone interacts with it. What I learned is that when people give a reaction to my work, it is always about emotions and memories. I was doing research for an artwork on dementia and my question was: how can sensorial stimuli create a benefit in their life? The people that I worked with lived in a clinic that had a domestic, but still relatively hospital or sterile, environment. So I was experimenting at the time with introducing repetitive, weird and organic patterns or textures to daily objects, like pillows, clothing, even napkins. In some cases, it really worked to increase appetite and communication in the clinic, and that's the first time I realised how touch can bring empathy into a daily environment. I keep thinking about what you said about how a lack of touch makes people less empathic and more hostile. There are so many studies that show how important touch is in growing healthy emotional behaviour.

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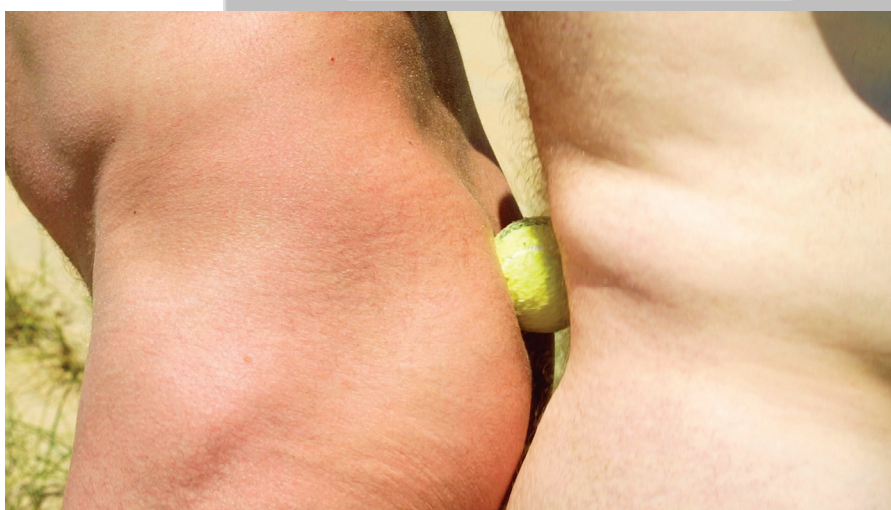
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In Lauri's upbringing, there was not so much space and attention for emotions and touch, which obviously shaped his way of dealing with emotions. Getting back to his body, feeling his body, understanding how it moves and what he could do with it, gave him a lot of freedom and confidence. I remember one specific phone call in which he was enthusiastically talking about a video that he made of him performing 'feminine' movements. Is it not strange that we label movements as masculine and feminine and judge people accordingly? Later he sent me the videos, and it was truly awesome to see how he explored all kinds of movements freely, without judgement. His performance was incredibly vulnerable, and powerful.

You can ask what movement of the body has to do with touch, right? Well, a lot, I found out through Lauri. Moving gets you 'in touch' with your body and if you are 'in touch' with your own body, you feel more confident, which makes you more open to

connecting with another person. Recently Lauri got into something that really gets close to that topic. He told me that he started experimenting with contact improvisation. A form of improvised dancing that involves the exploration of one's body in relationship to others by using the fundamentals of sharing weight, touch, and movement awareness. While remaining in physical touch with the other person, you play with falling off balance, counterbalance, learning the mechanics of the body in order to handle someone else's weight or be lifted. It gives an opportunity to get to know your partner past the physical point.

In contact improvisation there are no fixed rules, but they work with certain principles. For example, that you should take care of yourself and that you have to take responsibility for yourself. When you are dancing together, you have to be aware of where you are at all times. Lauri explained how this should be mutual. You pay attention to the fact that



My dad went to work, went to the gym, and when he was home he helped us with homework and made sure we were fed. We went to the movies together, to sports games, and so on. I think a lot of kids wanted that with their dads, so we just ended up hanging out with a lot of kids at our house.

B:

How was the touch between you and your dad?

P:

My dad was very cuddly and overprotective with us girls. My dad also bought my sanitary pads, taught me about boys. He was different because even my brother was not treated like how boys were treated a lot of the time. He said: "You are part of the family, you are cleaning up this side, and I am doing that side." Even when my brother was married, he did not need to be domesticated - I hate that word - because he grew up doing chores around the house and seeing my dad do the same thing. Other men always ask: "Oh why are you doing those things? That's a women's thing". But these are guys who had their mothers twenty-four-seven. They were not working, they were always at home. We tend to follow what we grew up with, or we do it totally 180 degrees the other way around. My dad did the latter, because he did not have an upbringing with a lot of love or a lot of touch. So he wanted to give that to us. My dad was very supportive to my brother, emotionally and physically. I was brought up in a society where kids could be beaten and school corporal punishment was a thing. My dad didn't want that, so he would go to school and tell them they couldn't do that. Not just for me but also for my brother.

B:

Can you tell something about the experience of touch in Zimbabwe from a more general cultural perspective? Do you have traditions or certain kinds of customs related to touch?

P:

From birth, there is a lot of touch. It's usually with the woman, because we piggyback the baby throughout the day. As they grow up, there is a lot of touching from the mother's side, and less so from the dad's side. But that is changing now. If you talk more about hand movements and that kind of thing, yeah, we have a lot of that. When we are communicating, hands are part of that communication. So you use your hands to emphasize things. Also, when we are laughing, we make physical contact. If you don't give your hand, you are dissing me.

B:

Laughing with your hands?

P:

We laugh and we hit hands, yes. You can also tell the relationship from the way we laugh. How is the laughing going on? Oh he did not raise his hands? Is he angry? And so on. Contact means a lot. Also, at funerals, we tend to have a lot of

K:

Yes and no. In Malay society, the lack of touching between men stems more from masculinity than sexuality. Touch between men can be very innocent, as I explained how it was in my family. Outside the family sphere, men are not very touchy, but in families this is quite normal. Malaysian culture is very patriarchal. Very male-dominated. If you are sensitive and cuddly, this is seen as very feminine. Men are supposed to be tough. That's toxic masculinity, like expressing your emotion is not a sign of strength.

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B:

What kind of effect has that on men, you think?

K:

Well, toxic masculinity affects men in a way that it makes them more stressed and depressed. Human emotion is a natural thing. If men can't show emotions, it has to come out differently. If you suppress emotions, at some point it will explode somewhere.

B:

How was your experience with men touching other men in the Netherlands?

K:

I feel like it's the social etiquette between me and other straight men not to touch. I would give women a hug easily. Somehow, women are more accepting than men.

B:

And how is touch between your homosexual friends?

K:

I give hugs to my gay friends. I have more straight friends than gay friends in the Netherlands, actually, and I give them hugs too. There is a difference between straight men in my inner circle and those outside the inner circle. Inside the inner circle, touching is normal. But outside this inner circle, I avoid physical contact with straight men because it just saves you a lot of trouble. If it's a woman and I give her a hug, she knows I'm not going to hit on her. But with straight men, you never know if they are homophobic. If I give them a hug, they may think I want to hit on them. And even if they're not homophobic, I think it's still not common for

Touching Without

14. INTERVIEW WITH

Esmaa
(MA)

(TELEVISION HOST,
TEACHER

AND

CHAIRPERSON
OF AL NISA)

Touching



I really wanted to talk to someone about the experience of touch within Arab culture and Islam, but since I didn't know anyone in my own network, it was quite difficult to find someone for an interview. I got to know Esmaa through Atria, the knowledge institute for Emancipation and Women's History. She is known from the talk show '*De Meiden van Halal*' and is chairperson of the board of Al Nisa. This is a foundation that stands for prompting Muslim women to increase (self) knowledge about Islam, about women in Islam and how this relates to Dutch society. Esmaa's parents are originally from Morocco, but she was born and raised in the Netherlands. I was very happy she wanted to do an interview with me and invited her to my house. When she came in, I immediately felt an enormously friendly and powerful energy. What followed was a fascinating conversation.

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it, you suffer. So no attachment. People die, friendship ends. I don't have to be attached because I know it is not permanent. That's what you learn, and in a way it's a good thing, actually. But I mean, in a way you also get a bit isolated because there is no more touching, no more attachment to something.

B:

How does touch make you feel more attached?

R:

Well, take this little beautiful duck, isn't it sweet? [Rick is showing me a small statue of a duck]. I saw this in the shop. I liked it, I touched it, and then I wanted to have it. I had the desire to possess. So I bought it. You understand how it works?

B:

Yes, recently I was talking with someone about how they use this in marketing and sales. Research has shown that a client is way more inclined to buy something when the client is touched.

R:

Yes, that's a psychological trick. It's a natural thing. If you don't touch it, you don't see it. If you go to a shop, and you cannot touch anything, would you still feel like going to the shop? No. Sometimes you go to a shop or art gallery, and then there is a sign saying 'don't touch'. It's not fun. I mean of course you cannot touch a painting, but we do have the desire to touch. To feel the texture. But we have this little rope in front of the painting. Could you imagine if that was

ABOUT

BIBI-

JOAN

Bibi-Joan (1985) is an artist who investigates how humans relate to themselves, each other, and the environment. She uses the body as a starting point to reflect on our behavior and ideas in our modern society. Over the past three years she has worked on several autonomous photo- and video projects, researching themes of masculinity, gender roles, power structures and intimacy. She is deeply committed to the current social and environmental challenges in our society and believes that fostering a non-dual perspective, empathy, and compassion will help people face these challenges together.

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