CHAPTER 4   THE ART OF TOUCH IN REMOTE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

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1   Introduction

When COVID-19 rapidly spread across the globe in 2020, and people were either encouraged or forced to self-isolate and stay at home, for many the only way to 'keep in touch' with family, friends, peers and colleagues was via virtual environments. Digital platforms – such as Skype, WhatsApp, Google Meets, Zoom, House Party and Microsoft Teams, among others – quickly became the only means by which people could 'reach out' to one another. As the physical boundaries of touch were being redrawn and aggressively (re)policed in public spaces and, as 'staying in contact'[1] with loved ones and colleagues was increasingly operationalised through digital technologies, traffic on the digital superhighway increased markedly.[2] Although many people were already well acquainted with that road, activities usually conducted in face-to-face environments soon migrated to the digital realm.

At the same time, through strategic advertising campaigns, many mobile network companies in South Africa promised that their networks provided opportunities for seamlessly sustaining both leisure and work activities online by using catchphrases that highlighted 'being together' and 'staying connected' while on the internet. Thus, through tactical (and metaphorically tactile) marketing strategies, online 'connectivity' was

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1   The phrases 'keeping in touch', 'reaching out' and 'staying in contact' allude to actual physical touch or tactility whilst in the presence of another person. I use them metaphorically here to refer to the sense of togetherness which many people search for in remote digital environments.

2   As early as mid-April 2020, mobile network companies in South Africa recorded increases in data consumption of between 30% and 40%; N Dludla 'UPDATE 1 - South Africa's Vodacom sees 40% jump in data usage as people stay at home' *Reuters* 2020, https://uk.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-safrica-vodacom-grp/update-1-south-africas-vodacom-sees-40-jump-in-data-usage-as-people-stay-at-home-idUKL5N2C432 (accessed 10 August 2020).

quickly presented as the basis of a new form of staying connected with others. With reference to theorists on touch and digital communication, as well as visual examples of advertisements, prototypes, images on social media platforms and artworks, I investigate the following questions that arise from this situation: What forms of touch are afforded by digital communication technologies? How is our embodied experience of sociality being transformed by digital networked communication? To what extent might the digital screen be considered an interface for embodied interaction? How are these ideas explored by a selection of South African artists? In short, this chapter explores how embodied perception and touch are presented, performed and experienced in remote digital environments, and draws some conclusions about the future of touch in the digital landscape, particularly as these ideas find expression in the arts.

I begin by immediately trying to put my finger on the significance of touch for being human, and briefly demonstrate the cultural construction of acceptable (and unacceptable) forms (and sites) of touch. I show that while the boundaries of touch have been strictly redrawn owing to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the sense of touch has never been free from some or other form of ideological policing. Thinking about touch as multiple or 'manifold,' as Mark Paterson puts it,[3] assists in giving shape to these discussions as well as those that follow. Thereafter, I reflect on Edward Casey's[4] and Sherry Turkle's[5] ruminations on how technologically mediated conversations impede deep dialogical engagements with others, ultimately leading to an inability, or reduced capacity, for empathy. The work of two South African artists, Jenna Burchell and Magdel Fourie (now Van Rooyen), who have reflected on this very dilemma, powerfully and insightfully illustrate these arguments. Their artworks hint at the promise, but ultimate failure, of remote digital communication technologies to facilitate a deep or intimate feeling of presence between families and loved ones online.

In the next section I briefly reflect on selected developments in haptic technologies that have attempted to facilitate the sense of 'presence' or 'co-presence' in digital environments. Finally, I try to grasp what the future of

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3   M Paterson *The senses of touch: Haptics, affects and technologies* (2007) 3.

4   ES Casey 'Going wireless. Disengaging the ethical life' in R Wilken & G Goggin (eds) *Mobile technology and place* (2013) 175.

5   S Turkle *Reclaiming conversation* (2015).

touch might hold in digital environments, based on insights I draw from a recent artwork produced by the South African artist, Katherine Bull and the French artist, Emmanuel de Montbron. These artists explore how connection between individuals may be produced by creatively applying what Laura Marks[6] refers to as 'haptic visuality'.

2   The significance and boundaries of touch

Touch is not only central to the ways in which we come to understand the world around us, but it is central to being human. In Western societies, the story of King Midas is the ur-myth of touch. Having long desired that everything he touched would turn to gold, when Dionysius grants him the ability to do so, Midas soon realises that his wish is more of a curse than a blessing. Unable to confine his touch to only those things he wants to turn golden, and because human interaction with the world is fundamentally tactile, soon, and to his dismay, everything around him turns to gold. The poignant message of this myth is that being human means that we are always already touching, whether voluntarily or not.

While touch is fundamental to being human, in everyday socio-cultural practices the boundaries of what is regarded as acceptable and unacceptable touch are continuously renegotiated according to our values, beliefs and attitudes.[7] For instance, we use ritualised forms of touch when we greet others, show compassion, or establish bonds between ourselves and other people.[8] But touch is complex and also risky, involving both embraces and stabbings, and healing and hand-to-hand combat. Moreover, at different historical moments, the boundaries of touch in private and public spaces are configured differently. Being 'the deepest sense' (as the

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6   LU Marks *The skin of the film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses* (1999).

7   In 2020 Wellcome Collection launched a new study that explores people's attitudes towards touch in various contexts. Entitled *The touch test*, the online questionnaire collects information about the similarities and differences in respondents' perceptions of touch; Wellcome Collection 'Wellcome Collection and BBC Radio 4 to explore the nation's attitudes towards touch' 2020, https://wellcomecollection.org/pages/XiW7tRQAACQA9k4C (accessed August 2020).

8   Notice how the elbow bump was viewed as a safer alternative to a handshake during the pandemic.

title of Classen's book indicates),[9] the cultural meanings assigned to touch stretch into the past and remain alive in modern social practices. It would, therefore, be inaccurate to suggest that touch was not regulated and policed before COVID-19 entered our touchscape.[10] For example, what is culturally regarded as acceptable and unacceptable adult-child touch – such as where and when breastfeeding, or sleeping with one's child, are condoned – depends on different ideological positions.[11] Equally, culturally endorsed views on masculine and feminine identities shows that touch is deeply gendered.[12] Far from being natural, our ideas about touch are deeply embedded in 'a historical, power-laden context'.[13] Touch, being crucial to embodied existence, therefore is multifaceted and open to diverse interpretations.

To complicate matters even further, touch is not confined to a single organ in the body. Paterson[14] identifies two forms of touch: exteroceptive and interoceptive. Exteroceptive (or cutaneous) touch is felt on the surface of the skin. This form of touch is direct and concerns the sensations we experience in our everyday embodied 'tactile-spatial' encounters.[15] One could suggest that, as exteroceptive touch became increasingly regulated in public spaces owing to COVID-19, many people progressively became suspicious of physical touch, only doing so if mediated by hand sanitiser, disinfectants or rigorous hand-washing, as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO).[16] But there is more to touch than the

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9   C Classen *The deepest sense: A cultural history of touch* (2012).

10   Touchscape is a term that I borrow from Ian Borer (2013) who uses it to describe the ways in which people feel and understand a city based on their bodily engagement with and movement in it; MI Borer 'Being in the city: The sociology of urban experiences' (2013) 7 *Sociology Compass* 965.

11   See JO Halley *Boundaries of touch. Parenting and adult-child intimacy* (2009).

12   C Classen *The book of touch* (2005) 3.

13   Halley (n 11) 165.

14   Paterson (n 3).

15   Paterson (n 3) 2.

16   In an interim recommendation published on 1 April 2020, the WHO stated that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted through respiratory droplets or direct contact. The document states that contact transmission occurs through the mucosa of the mouth, nose or eyes when touched by contaminated hands. The WHO recommended the use of alcohol-based hand rubs and regular hand washing with soap and water. In this way, the hands – one of the vehicles of cutaneous

physiological functions that allow us to feel pressure, temperature, pain and movement (or contract a virus). Apart from exteroceptive touch,[17] Paterson also identifies deep or interoceptive touch. Being inward-oriented, this form of touch is more difficult to describe than immediate, cutaneous touch, which comes down to mere sensation. Instead, interoceptive touch includes the affective and emotional, and leans toward the metaphorical. As Paterson explains,[18] touch is then also 'a sense of communication. It is receptive, expressive, can communicate empathy. It can bring distant objects and people into proximity.'

While our sense of exteroceptive touch was restricted in public spaces in light of the global pandemic, digital communication technologies were quickly presented as offering the means by which to metaphorically 'keep in touch'. Released in April 2020, Vodacom's advertisement entitled *Vodacom Together | # StayConnected* (Figure 4.1) coupled the ideas of a stable internet connection with 'coming together' to 'learn', 'celebrate', 'move', 'cook', 'relax', 'work' and 'play'.[19] While the popular 1969 Beatles hit *Come together* plays in the background*,* the audience sees, among others, images of a teacher reading to a child, a toddler presumably taking her first steps, a young girl blowing out birthday candles on a cake, and a woman doing yoga, with all these activities conducted in front of a computer or cell phone screen on which we see other people usually smiling in response. Thus, a Vodacom data subscription would presumably allow South Africans to 'stay connected' and 'be together' in a metaphorical sense. It is the deeper – or interoceptive – form of touch that is advocated by Vodacom in this advertisement, because apparently 'even when we can't be close, we can be together'.[20]

touch – quickly became the instruments of possible contamination and infection. World Health Organisation *Interim recommendation* 1 April 2020, https://www. who.int/docs/default-source/inaugural-who-partners-forum/who-interim-recommendation-on-obligatory-hand-hygiene-against-transmission-of-covid-19. pdf (accessed 10 August 2020). Other forms of social touch (hugging, kissing and handshaking) were also restricted as a result of COVID-19.

17   Paterson (n 3) 15.
18   Paterson (n 3) 1.
19   The advert can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLRmNwseqT8.
20   Vodacom SA 2020 Vodacom Together|#StayConnected, https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=HLRmNwseqT8 (accessed 10 August 2020).
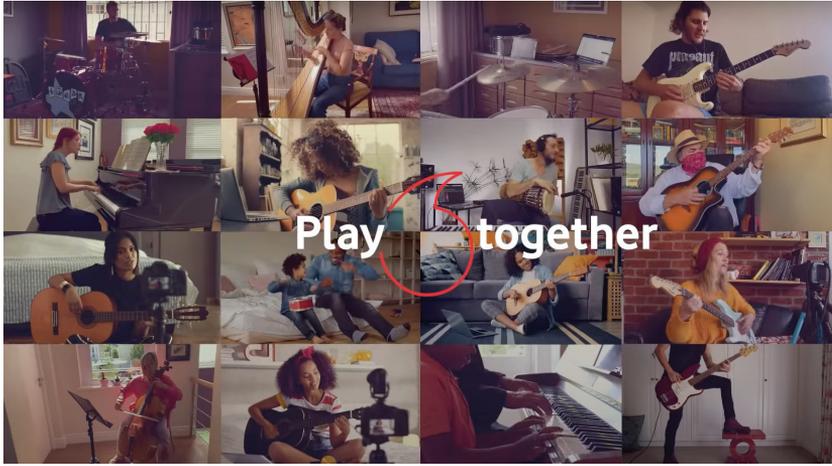
Figure 4.1: Vodacom Together | #StayConnected. 2020 (Screenshot by author)

Being online is the basis of these forms of connection and 'being together'. However, connection – or accessing the sense of touch in its interoceptive form – in the digital sphere, to a large extent at least, remains a metaphorical dream rather than a reality. As I will show in the following section, for some critics and artists the superhighway of digital communication offers merely the illusion of connection and, paradoxically, in these situations, togetherness remains mostly out of reach.

3   Out of touch

While it is not a novel observation that digital technologies assist in establishing and maintaining intimate social relationships at a physical distance, it does appear that this situation has been accelerated by the social impact of the pandemic. Carlos Velasco and Marianna Obrist[21] argue that 'the pandemic appears to be changing the game entirely'. While many people had never imagined going online to attend a funeral, a birthday

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21   C Velasco & M Obrist 'Life after corona and the digitisation of human experiences' *BI Business Review* 2020, https://www.bi.edu/research/business-review/articles/2020/04/life-after-corona-and-the-rapid-digitisation-of-human-experiences/ (accessed 10 August 2020).

party, an exhibition opening, or to take a game drive, these, and many other social activities, have become part of what is widely being referred to in the media as 'the new normal.'[22] Despite the inequalities inherent in the digital communication economy, especially in developing countries such as South Africa, the increased digitisation of human experience and the seamless integration of offline and digital worlds into 'a sort of mixed reality'[23] appears to have taken place.[24] As a consequence, it is necessary to interrogate what embodied perception means in light of the rise of these new technologies in our everyday lived experience.

Casey[25] notes that, at first glance, digital communication and, in particular, mobile technologies, offer people communication that is unencumbered by the wires, plugs and other baggage that bind us to particular places. This means, however, that 'there are fundamental features of embodied existence that suffer neglect in a wireless world'.[26] For instance, our experiences of ourselves, other people, as well as the environments that surround us, are profoundly affected when we use mobile technologies to 'be together'. Being in the same place as another person allows us to experience and read the nuances of both their facial and bodily expressions. These are all aspects that constitute the *presence* of another person. 'Being in the presence of a person', Casey argues,[27] leads to intricate and deep dialogue that 'simply cannot be experienced otherwise'. Moreover, according to Casey,[28] even in those situations where we are able to see the other person's facial and bodily expressions on a screen, the 'range of dialogical interaction' allowed in such situations is limited. The lack of 'corporeal presence' when people chat via video conferencing

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22   See Bryan Keogh's summary of what 'the new normal' might look like. B Keogh 'Coronavirus weekly: Balancing a "new normal" while keeping COVID-19 in check' *The Conversation* 2020, https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-weekly-balancing-a-new-normal-while-keeping-covid-19-in-check-138577 (accessed 10 August 2020).

23   Velasco & Obrist (n 21).

24   According to Velasco and Obrist (n 21) 'mixed reality' refers to the everyday use of digital technologies that provide access to the internet, such as cellular phones and computers.

25   Casey (n 4) 175.

26   As above.

27   As above.

28   As above.

restricts the 'subtle cues' that come with face-to-face interactions.[29] These cues may include 'breathing and speech patterns, skin tones, nervous energy, placidity, and so forth'.[30] It would also include silences, or what is communicated when nothing is said. 'Keeping in touch' via cell phones and other remote communication devices is an experience that Casey finds lacking because the *presence* of the other person is absent. In this sense then, and according to Casey's position on the matter, when we communicate with others via digital devices, we are unable to experience Paterson's interoceptive form of touch.[31] Put simply, we are 'out of touch' with others.

Turkle[32] similarly maintains that when children use text instead of face-to-face conversation, they do not learn social skills such as listening, negotiating and empathising with others, as well as the joy that comes with being understood by others. Living in a state of constant distraction, children learn a variety of new skills, such as 'phubbing' which is the ability to keep eye contact with one person while texting another on your cell phone. Turkle poignantly notes:[33] 'I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship, and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy.' Like Casey, Turkle[34] regards face-to-face encounters with others as the event where conversation is learnt. It is via those encounters, when we are fully present to each other, that we experience vulnerability, because we are unable to edit what we have written; online we are able to endlessly craft a particular version of ourselves. Moreover, we discover ourselves, as we listen not only to others, but also to ourselves in open-ended conversations. According to Turkle,[35] instead of conversation being the 'talking cure', owing to our new always online technologies, we have been 'cured of talking' and have entered into 'a crisis of empathy'.

Turkle[36] is especially concerned that social media technologies are

29   As above.
30   As above.
31   Paterson (n 3).
32   Turkle (n 5) 10-11.
33   Turkle (n 5) 17.
34   Turkle (n 5) 19.
35   Turkle (n 5) 13 21.
36   Turkle (n 5) 24.

leading to an inability to identify with another person's feelings. Although technology allows us to be present in each other's lives when it would be impossible to do so in reality, Turkle[37] finds that 'we are somehow more lonely than before' and 'our children are less empathetic than they should be for their age'. As the title of her book indicates, Turkle[38] believes that we need to *reclaim conversation,* which involves acquiring the skills of 'speaking and listening with attention'.[39] In other words, Turkle and Casey agree that being present to others in an onscreen environment is quite different from being in the *presence* of another person in real time. As a communication interface, the digital screen fundamentally transforms our embodied experience of sociality. When the corporeal self is replaced by a virtual self, the other's 'actual ambience' is profoundly altered.[40]

The promise, but ultimate failure of remote communication technologies to facilitate a deep sense of presence for those who are physically or geographically far away, is the focus of the works of South African artist Jeanna Burchell *Family portrait*[41] and *Muted btwn us*.[42]

37   Turkle (n 5) 26.

38   Turkle (n 5) 29-30.

39   Turkle's argument is also relevant to private voice notes sent on WhatsApp, video-messaging and video calls which are not quite the same as face-to-face dialogue. According to Turkle (n 5) 251, 'we underestimate how much we learn and read and take in of each other's breathing and body language and presence in a space .... Technology filters things out .... Breathing the same air matters.'

40   Casey (n 4) 176.

41   Burchell, J *Family portrait* nd, https://www.art.co.za/jennaburchell/family-portrait.php (accessed 27 October 2021).

42   J Burchell *Muted btwn us*, *art.co.za* (nd), https://www.art.co.za/jennaburchell/muted.php (accessed 27 October 2021).

Figure 4.2: Jenna Burchell, *Family portrait,* 2007. Interactive sound installation. 3500mm (w) x 5000mm (d) x 3000mm (h). Stilts, rope, postcolonial chairs, frame, telephones, custom circuitry. Courtesy of the artist.

Family portrait represents the artist's family, who are scattered across the globe (Figure 4.2). The installation consists of two chairs of which the legs are tied to rickety stilts. A telephone is placed on each chair in lieu of a person, who would in any case struggle not to fall off these raised seats. Real bodies clearly are not comfortably part of this portrait setting. Another telephone hangs on the wall inside a frame. On one side, a massive frame surrounds the installation and the audience is asked to step inside and answer the telephones. Once inside, a telephone rings and when answered, a pre-recorded voice is heard. When one puts down the receiver, another telephone immediately rings. The voices play at random and express a variety of emotions, ranging from frustration and desperation to anger as they struggle to communicate with the participant. The telephones allude to the various communication technologies – including digital networks – that keep families and friends 'in touch' with one another across the globe. It is clear, however, that, like Casey and Turkle, Burchell considers effective communication over these networks to be

limited. The stark atmosphere produced by the crisp, white room adds to the sense that communication between the members of this scattered and detached family is less than warm and satisfying. Interestingly, the viewer-participant actively contributes to the performance of the artwork as their bodily presence is needed to begin the 'conversation'. Thus, audience participation highlights the role of embodied presence and exteroceptive touch in the communication of the concept of the work.


Figure 4.3: Jenna Burchell, *Muted btwn us,* 2009. Stilts, rope, postcolonial chairs, frame, pedestal, television, video. 2000mm x 2000mm x 2000mm. Courtesy of the artist.

The theme of the difficulties of communication and, more specifically, the 'decay of … conversation between two individuals crossed over a hyper-real space such as the cell phone, internet, skype etc' is continued in *Muted*

btwn us (2009) (Figure 4.3).[43] The tall unbalanced chairs reappear in this work, but the telephones have been replaced by two television sets that are painted white. Each television plays a video comprising a lost signal pattern, white noise, interspersed by short instances where one can see a mouth on one screen and an eye on the other. The mouth tries to speak, and the eye shows subtle emotional expressions, but there is nothing to confirm that the one is directly reacting to or interacting with the other. Although the videos play for approximately one minute, they are not the same length. Careful timing of the videos allows them to play in-sync with each other once every hour.[44] In neither of the artworks can one see the other person's facial and bodily expressions; the depth of meaningful 'dialogical interaction'[45] is therefore restricted. The corporeal presence of those communicating in the works is replaced instead by the prominence of their absence, thereby restricting the ambience and possibility of empathetic engagement enabled by face-to-face conversations. The exchange of 'subtle cues'[46] that comes with direct communication is thoroughly denied.
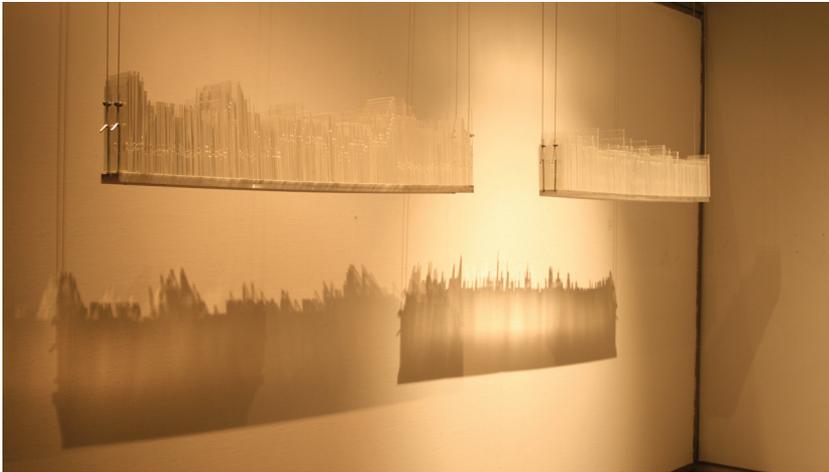
Figure 4.4: Magdel Fourie, *Concrete conversations,* 2010. Perspex, 250mm x 1200mm x 180mm. Courtesy of the artist.

43   As above.
44   As above.
45   Casey (n 4) 175.
46   As above.

In an effort to make the presence of her geographically distant father tangible, in *Concrete conversations*,[47] Magdel Fourie (now Van Rooyen) transforms the sound wave recording of their Skype conversation into physical form (Figure 4.4). Pieces of perspex, carefully cut to the length of the matching sound wave and placed side by side, create an architectural form that casts a shadow reminiscent of a cityscape on the wall behind it. Placed side by side, and when viewed from an angle, the shadows of the two cityscapes (representing the cities in which the artist and her father reside) overlap, possibly suggesting their togetherness through the communication medium. However, the shadow and the overlapping of the forms remain ephemeral, and hence the connection of father and daughter is not guaranteed. Similarly, the transparent perspex can only hint at the residues of a conversation, a fleeting memory of what once was a tangible relationship. It also hints at the struggle of connecting through remote communication technologies, where stable connections often break down to the extent that conversations on digital platforms are often marked by broken sentences and interrupted exchanges. This failed attempt at fully 'replac[ing] the concrete other'[48] and rendering the intangible memory of a remote digital conversation tangible, is but another example of the seeming inability of remote digital communication technologies to afford satisfying experiences of being in the presence of corporeal others. Instead, as Turkle[49] agrees, digital communication technologies only lead to a loss in our ability to empathise with another person.

4 Holding hands over the internet: Telepresence, co-presence and the promise of digital touch

In light of the examples discussed in the previous section, which emphasise the loss of close contact in digital environments, or the sense of being 'out of touch' with others, it is worth noting that the word 'digital' is derived from the Latin *digitalis,* which means 'of the finger' or 'a finger's breadth'.[50] Paradoxically then, from the start, the digital realm was (idealistically perhaps) envisioned as relating to tactility and directly

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47   Fourie, M *WayStation. Something pauses* (Catalogue 2011) (unpublished).

48   Casey (n 4) 176.

49   Turkle (n 5) 24.

50   K Paulsen *Here/there: Telepresence, touch and art at the interface* (2017) 121.

to the body. In the history of robotics, the term 'telepresence' was coined to refer to 'the sense of presence at a distance'.[51] Coined by the co-founder of MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Marvin Minsky, telepresence denoted the computer's ability to recreate the physical sensation of touch for 'teleoperators' by means of feedback actuators,[52] or force-feedback devices.[53] Telepresence, therefore, enables an actual experience of 'being in touch', rather than a metaphorical one, with computers being used to 'translate feel into feel' by means of haptic sensors.[54]

Kris Paulsen explains that 'touch is the primary sense that distinguishes telepresence from simple telecommunication'. In order to be 'telepresent' to another place or person, in the sense that Minsky uses the term, one has to be able to physically interact with the remote environment, and even change it. In 1993 the artist-engineers Ken Goldberg and Richard Wallace presented a device named *Data Dentata,* or the Datamitt, at the SIGGRAPH conference. This mitt was a metal wire-wrapped tube that contained touch sensors and haptic actuators that allowed users to 'hold hands over the internet'.[55] One user placed their hand over a rubber ball inside the mitt. If another user, at another computer, squeezed the ball in her Datamitt, the sensors in the Datamitt of the other user would be triggered and activate a soft squeeze on that user's hand. In this way, a modem became the medium for physical contact, as each user could return the gesture telekinetically and literally hold hands over the internet.

One should, however, not forget that although Minsky's conception of telepresence is grounded in touch, he did not conceive of telepresence as necessarily an *embodied* experience. In his *Society of the mind*[56] Minsky asks what the human is and how *it* works. He comes to the conclusion that the agents that constitute the human mind are like components of a computer programme. Minsky imagines that if each brain cell that makes up the society of the mind is replaced with a computer chip, although impractical, that machine would, for all intents and purposes, be the same

51   Paterson (n 3) 127.
52   M Minsky 'Telepresence' *Omni Magazine* 1980, http://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/papers/Telepresence.html (accessed 27 October 2021).
53   Paterson (n 3) 131.
54   Minsky (n 52).
55   Goldberg as quoted in Paulsen (n 50) 123.
56   M Minsky *Society of the mind* (1986).

as a human being. In this transhumanist hypothetical dream, a conscious mind could be transferred into a non-human entity, thereby overcoming the biological body. Like Jean Baudrillard[57] and Hans Moravec,[58] Minsky's transhumanist conception of technology follows the liberal humanist notion that technology allows the mind to be set free from the body which can (and should) be discarded.

The term 'telepresence' was later adapted by Kim et al,[59] who contend that 'copresence' is the feeling of being with another person albeit via a computer interface. Copresence might then also be described as 'mediated social touch' or 'a sense of presence of a distant other'.[60] The goal of haptic technologies is to enhance this sense of copresence. In military training and surgical simulation, haptic technologies, which engineer touch experiences across distance, have been in development since the 1950s.[61] From wearable gloves to hand-held devices, haptic technologies work at the levels of the finger, hand, arm, and the whole body. Not surprisingly, they have also become popular in recreational spheres such as internet sex and video games, and are a fast-growing feature of multimedia design and research. The main goal of such haptic technologies is to engender a sense of presence – a sense of touch – that is missing from virtual activities.

David Parisi[62] takes a more sceptical approach to the way in which touch has been positioned as 'lacking' in the digital realm. He argues that in the twenty-first century, marketers working for digital technology corporations, such as Nintendo, Apple, Hewlett Packard and Immersion Corporation, produced the perception that digital touch interfaces were 'uniquely qualified to alleviate' the sense of touch that had allegedly 'been forgotten, left behind, and marginalized by a media interfacing schematic overdependent on audio-visual technologies'.[63] By means

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57   J Baudrillard *The ecstasy of communication* trans Schutze & Schutze (1988).

58   H Moravec *Mind children: The future of robot and human intelligence* (1988).

59   J Kim et al 'Transatlantic touch: A study of haptic collaboration over long distance' (2004) 13 *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 335.

60   A Haans & W Ijsselsteijn 'Mediated social touch: A review of current research and future directions' (2006) 9 *Virtual Reality* 149 153.

61   For a brief overview of the engineering and development of haptic technologies in the USA, see Paterson (n 3) 130-131.

62   D Parisi *Archaeologies of touch: Interfacing with haptics from electricity to computing* (2018) 9.

63   As above.

of advertisements that emphasised that 'Touching is good', 'Touching is believing', and that one could 'Touch the future', the perception was created that 'the cultural sensorium [was] in a state of urgent crisis', leading to the manufacturing of a desire for reconnecting to the lost sense of touch by means of digital interfaces.[64] The construction of a haptic subject thus was closely intertwined with a marketing strategy aligned to a burgeoning business centred on 'communicating tactile sensations through mobile touchscreens [thereby] providing fresh infusions of capital into the computer haptics project'.[65] Although their goals are not the sale of touchscreen devices in particular, this criticism may be lodged against the mobile service providers that I discussed above, whose main aim currently is to attract customers seeking 'connection' by capitalising on the lack thereof in our offline realities owing to social distancing and isolation. However, Parisi[66] also notes that such advertisements merely promise a quest 'after an elusive Holy Grail of touch interfacing', which is only hinted at in the designs he mentions. Whether or not Parisi is correct that the emphasis in marketing campaigns on a so-called 'alleged' lack of touch in the digital realm has produced a haptic subject cannot be answered here. Suffice it to restate that Casey and Turkle, as well as Burchell, Fourie (now Van Rooyen) and others (discussed below), base their arguments – and their creative productions – on a deeply-felt sense of lack of copresence in digital communication environments.

5   Chasing the Holy Grail of touch

The IN-TOUCH project at UCL's Knowledge Lab led by Prof Carey Jewitt is but one example of the search for actual tactile engagements in online environments. In other words, whether or not consumer capitalism has master-minded the construction of haptic subjects, and despite the promise of digital touch that haptic technologies afford, people do appear to feel 'out of touch' when they communicate with others online. This

64   As above.
65   Parisi (n 62) 10.
66   Parisi (n 62) 3.

lack of connection is confirmed by Jewitt et al,[67] who identify what they describe as 'a sensorial paucity, and the desire for more felt digital experiences that reconfigure, in particular, the place of touch' in the digital realm.

The researchers asked apprentice professionals in the design of future digital communications to build a prototype for 'a device, system or environment for remote personal communication through "touch"'.[68] This 'speculative'[69] research uses a rapid prototyping approach, in which the participants designed 10 objects ranging from a haptic chair to a tactile emoticon, and from a mood ball to a touch-cape. The designers used a range of differently textured materials that would stimulate a particular response to touch in the user. Jewitt et al[70] report that in their conversations, the participants 'consistently commented on the '"lack", the "not enough-ness" of digital remote communication, notably in relation to the absence of touch'. The prototypes they designed thus attempted to imagine 'a "tactile and sensory" interface designed to respond to users who feel "disconnected" via the distancing emotionally stripped out technologies'.[71] The research by Jewitt et al[72] highlights the material differences between human touch and machinic touch, 'with the former valued as soft, warm, flexible and reactive, and the later (*sic*) devalued as the opposite'. Despite their concerns over the potential of digital touch to be inappropriate, fake or inauthentic, and the possibility that it may easily lead to 'disillusion and disconnection', overall the participants regarded digital touch 'as having potential to support new forms of connection and attachment, including changing boundaries between bodies, shareable touch-experiences, and more porous fluid boundaries between technology and the body'.[73] Jewitt et al[74] thus speculate that digital touch – of the kind that the participants

67   C Jewitt, K Mackley & S Price 'Digital touch for remote personal communication: An emergent sociotechnical imaginary' (2019) *New Media & Society*, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819894304 (accessed 27 October 2021).

68   Jewitt et al (n 67) 8.

69   Jewitt et al (n 67) 6.

70   Jewitt et al (n 67) 12.

71   Jewitt et al (n 67) 15.

72   Jewitt et al (n 67) 17.

73   Jewitt et al (n 67) 18.

74   As above.

designed – may potentially lead to a sense of copresence in digital communication. Their research points to a desperate search for ways to reconnect with touch in a realm considered to be lacking in both presence and ambience as described by Casey, and a desire to foster situations where empathy can be practised or (re)learnt in the digital sphere.

6   Haptic visuality and the memory of touch

Whereas the example I discussed above utilised haptic technologies to generate exteroceptive touch experiences in remote digital communication, the following two examples use images to activate both exteroceptive and interoceptive touch. In other words, instead of literally feeling in touch with someone on the other side of a digital device, these examples trigger deeply-felt tactile experiences by means other than the skin. While still exemplifying the search for the Holy Grail of touch in the digital sphere, their tactics are different, and perhaps more effective.

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos are becoming increasingly popular on Instagram and YouTube. ASMR videos show moving images of touch and texture paired with evocative sounds. Soap that is being crunched, paint being mixed, and nails tapping on a hard surface are all popular subject matter. The moving images, and/ or the sounds that accompany them produce tingling, static-like bodily sensations, specifically across the skull and down the back of the neck, in 'those capable of experiencing it'.[75] These euphoric sensations are usually accompanied by intense feelings of relaxation. From an aesthetic point of view, ASMR videos on Instagram usually show close-ups, use prominent lines, and show little depth, with anonymised body parts often appearing alongside striking and colourful patterns. In a further visual nod to the sense of touch, many of these videos specifically include hands. The arousing images onscreen combined with depicted hands leave the sensual traces of touch. Jennifer O'Meara argues that '[i]n these ways, hand-focused ASMR videos can be viewed as an alternative to various prototypes developed by hardware companies and computer scientists

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75   EL Barrat & NJ Davis 'Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR): A flow-like mental state' (2015) 3 *PeerJ* 1, https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.851 (accessed 27 October 2021).

with a view to providing touchscreens with the sense of tactile variability and satisfaction they currently lack'.[76]

By staging hypnotic and arousing images that evoke touch, ASMR videos solicit a form of looking that has been termed 'haptic visuality'.[77] Laura Marks[78] uses this term to draw attention to a tactile way of looking at images that connects the viewer with the image. Haptic images activate the memory of touch (as well as the other senses) and, thus, appeal to the audiences' embodied knowledge. Marks[79] suggests that 'haptic images invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well'.
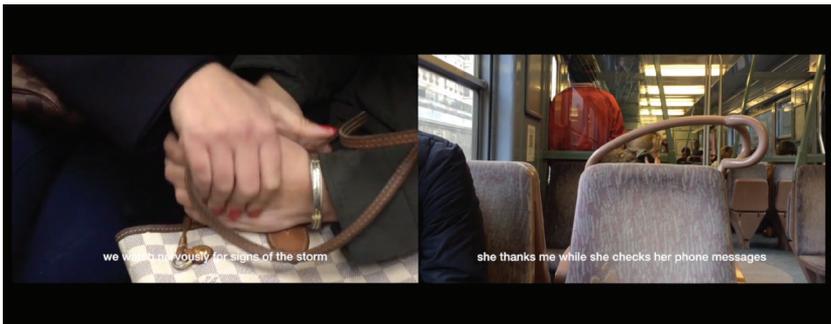
Figure 4.5: Katherine Bull and Emmanuel de Montbron, *Towards Telepathy*, 2017. Digital video still. Courtesy of the artists. (Screenshot by author)

Although Marks's arguments centre on film, I suggest that haptic visuality might be a promising way in which to connect with others in digital environments. To my mind, it is an interesting alternative to the 'speculative' haptic prototypes being explored by Jewitt et al.[80] My argument can be illustrated through a close analysis of a collaborative artwork by South African artist, Katherine Bull, and French artist, Emmanuel de Montbron, entitled *Towards telepathy* (2017) (Figure 4.5).

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76   J O'Meara 'Touchscreens, tactility, and material traces: From avant-garde artists to Instagram ASMRtists' (2019) 8 *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 241.

77   See Marks (n 6).

78   Marks (n 6) xi.

79   Marks (n 6) 2.

80   Jewitt et al (n 67).

This work, I argue, employs modes of haptic visuality to connect both the artists to each other as well as to the audience. The artwork is a two-channel video that plays for three minutes and 30 seconds. The two artists, one based in Cape Town, South Africa and the other in Paris, France, engaged in a long-distance 'conversation' over the course of a few months. The conversation was conducted using two modes: video and text. Using their mobile phones, each day the artists shot videos of scenes from their daily lives. They then sent a short – one to two second – clip from the video to their distant collaborator via their shared blog. The other artist responded by making a video and uploading a short clip to the blog. At the same time, they kept a dream journal and posted extracts from the journal – written accounts of their dreams – on the blog. At the end of the 'conversation' the artists shared all the content they had gathered through their videos and dream journals. Then each artist independently created a collage based on all the material they had collectively gathered so that a parallel dialogue was shown through images and text. The two videos were placed side-by-side to form the final two-channel video artwork that was exhibited at Gallery Momo as part of the exhibition *Closer than ever* curated by Michaela Limberis.[81]

It is interesting to note that the videos they sent to each other showed only fleeting movement and fragments of daily experiences that were sometimes unclear. To some extent, these poignant images represented the alleged 'unrepresentable' sense of touch via their 'visceral effects',[82] transferring the presence of one artist to the other. The tactile memory of presence is conveyed via the visual image. It could be suggested that all the examples I discussed in this section act as vehicles that trigger memories of past experiences with others. While never able to entirely stand in for the presence of another, they can thus be considered conduits for the creation of a sense of copresence, even if this experience is always ever flickering and transient, rather than concrete or tangible. *Towards telepathy*, however, more poignantly and, perhaps more effectively, suggests, contra Casey and Turkle, that embodied connection may be possible – even if only imaginatively – in the realm of digital communication. In this work,

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81   Art Meets TV 2017. The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYpxL4swgnA.

82   Marks (n 6) xvii.

it is precisely the mobile phone that brought the artists 'closer than ever' and into each other's daily lives and dream worlds.

In 2020 Limberis requested that the artists reflect on their previous long-distance collaboration in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, she asked them to reflect on what it means to 'connect' using digital technology. In the reflection, *Closer than ever (again)*, Bull comments on their choice of using a mobile phone, which she describes as a 'kind of prosthetic extension of us,' but in this case, 'using it a bit differently to communicate through fragments of … video'.[83] De Montbron adds that he 'was always thinking about the project because [they] had to film [their] surroundings'.[84] In response, Bull remarks that 'the other person becomes present as well with your (*sic*) all day, and at night sometimes when you're dreaming as well …'.[85] In this way the artwork, via digital communication technologies, appears to have engendered a kind of copresence, or interoceptive touch, between these two artists that, despite avoiding actual touch altogether, encouraged a very deep and meaningful mode of interaction.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have not paid attention to the various modes of actual, or exteroceptive, forms of touch that are enabled by touchscreens, mobile phones and other mobile devices. Equally, I have not been able to touch on the ways in which mobile devices themselves have become an integral part of our daily routines, our being-with-others and being together. These indeed are avenues that would be relevant in a consideration of embodiment and digital communication technologies. However, these are routes that have already been taken by others and were of less interest to me in making this particular argument. Instead, for the sake of economy, I have confined this discussion to a consideration of the ways in which both a lack of, and a promise of, touch are represented, performed and experienced in various examples from visual and digital culture that

83   Art Meets TV 2020 'Closer than ever (again)' Katherine Bull & Emmanuel de Montbron, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlFm4cNr4pc (accessed 27 October 2021).
84   As above.
85   As above.

seek to either highlight or overcome tactile deficiency in remote digital communication.

The screen, as Paulsen notes,[86] 'is where we all now increasingly live, act, fight, love, and touch'. As I have argued throughout, mobile digital communication technologies promise the possibility of being constantly connected and in touch, even if people are physically dislocated from one another. People use a mix of technologies to keep in touch with others and to create what Jewitt et al[87] refer to as 'different senses of "co-presence" across relationships'. As I have tried to show, the visual image plays a powerful role in the communication of touch and connection with others in our everyday use of digital technologies. Cultivating the use of haptic images, instead of networks and hashtags on social media, may indeed give rise to more connected social interactions in remote digital communication environments. The future of touch in the digital landscape will depend on our ability to imaginatively reconstruct our memories of actual touch in digital environments. For some this task might be difficult, but for those who actively seek the presence of others in the digital realm, the creation of copresence with another person may be a deeply rewarding, although time-consuming, journey. Its success, of course, will depend on the amount of time and effort that we are willing to invest in it.

Acknowledgments

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86   Paulsen (n 50) 16.
87   Jewitt et al (n 67) 4.

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