Squidgy World | Tactile Boundaries

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The *Hug a Hoodie* bean bag sculptures featured in Turf Project's *Squidgy World* exhibition lie unassumingly on the floor. Created by Yolanda Shields – also known as Milktooth – the sculptures reflect the negotiation of touch on multiple levels in the artist's life. These sculptures navigate the boundaries between touch and art, and the boundaries of interpersonal touch (physical contact between people) navigated by both Shields and their son in daily life. This Turf text explores these ideas around tactile boundaries, and later brings them into conversation with connected ideas from my own research into relationships between loneliness, touch, and its digital mediation.

Boundaries of touch and art

We are traditionally discouraged from touching artworks in exhibitions, even where these seem to invite visitors to do so. It was in one of Shields' more recent shows that people kept expressing a desire to feel the pieces. At first unsure about the idea, the artist eventually decided to create a new set of soft artworks that visitors would be able to interact with. The resulting parrot green bean bags that take centre stage in *Squidgy World* implicitly invite people to touch not just with their hands, but with their whole bodies; that there is no sign stating visitors are allowed to do this is part of Shields' deliberately "mischievous" approach that plays on the traditional expectations of art shows.

Shields and other artists at Turf Projects have observed the sculptures' impact on people's behaviour with interest. Visitors sometimes come into the space, look around, hesitate, turn to go, turn back, and hesitate once more before they try the bean bags. Self-conscious delineations between adult / child, professional / non-professional loosen, as do the sculptures themselves. Bodies bend, flop, and sink into more relaxed states, and the sculptures evolve through these exchanges, stretching and becoming squishier, with foam beads tumbling through their stitched compartments.

The loosening of the sculptures reflects the relaxation of Shields' own feelings around other people touching their art, and over the course of the exhibition they have explored their feelings around the residue of people's touch on the sculptures: "I kept checking in with myself – I would examine the pieces and say 'OK, it's been touched, how do I feel about that?'". This progression highlights the fluidity of touch, which we sometimes tend to think of in a fixed way. As scholars like Cranny Francis have pointed out, touch is an evolving physical, emotional, and intellectual practice that is always in flux.

Boundaries of interpersonal touch

The sculptures also tell another story that may be less apparent to the visitor; that of the challenges individuals with strong tactile boundaries face in negotiating interpersonal touch.

For Shields and their son, interpersonal touch is not a welcome or comfortable experience. Instead, other people's touch resides as "lingering ghosts", which continue to affect them long after an interaction has taken place. Shields notes a particular mismatch in expectations around hugging: for

example, their son, who is on the autistic spectrum, is viewed as "cool and aloof" for not engaging with others in this way.

In my own research workshops into loneliness, touch, and its digital mediation, some of the people who took part articulated similarly strong tactile boundaries. Many preferred other modes of communication, and also had distinct ways of valuing and conceptualising touch (for example in visual or audio forms). Sometimes though, not being comfortable with physically touching others could contribute to feelings of loneliness. For example, one participant recounted how as a student they had felt lonelier when everyone around them was hugging: "at times, it made me feel like I wasn't building as strong a relationship with them". Others told stories of trying to build their confidence with interpersonal touch, seeking out workshops which facilitated tactile engagement with other people: "asking for touch is scary and embarrassing!".
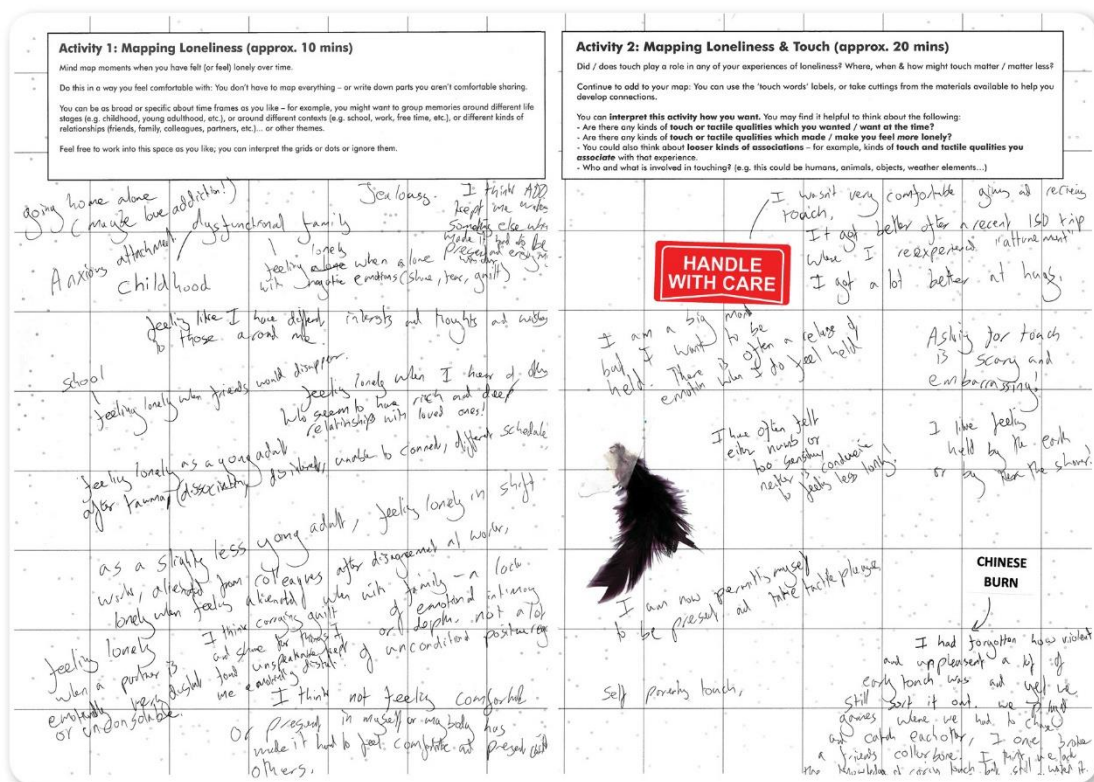
Participant workshop map, exploring the role of touch in experiences of loneliness ("asking for touch is scary and embarrassing!").

Touch and agency

We all have our own touch preferences and conceptualisations, and this was very apparent in my findings, which showed that touch – in a range of forms – played bigger and smaller roles for different people, and in different circumstances of loneliness; when it came specifically to *managing* feelings of loneliness, interpersonal touch, and proximity to others (as an extension of interpersonal touch) often featured, but people also spoke about the touch of animals, the natural world, materials, and objects.

The *Hug a Hoodie* sculptures of *Squidgy World* focus on creating soothing sensations for people that can be experienced independently. For Shield's son, wearing his hoodie is akin to wearing a comfort blanket as a suit of armour, where the material's softness provides reassurance. Yet, as Shields notes, for many, the hoodie carries negative cultural associations of "delinquent" youths, ignoring the complex stories of each individual wearer.

As the artist also emphasises, permission and agency are firmly with the individual in interactions with materials and objects. These ideas about permission and agency were also foregrounded in the phase of my research that focused on the role of digital touch in experiences of loneliness. These still-emerging technologies – which digitally deliver aspects of touch such as warmth, vibration, and pressure – go beyond the everyday touch screen (think, for example, of VR controllers, 'robopets', or items that can be worn on the body), and can be used in a single location or over physical distance. In this part of my study, people were invited to create 'rapid prototypes' (rough approximations of a design idea in 3D) of touch technologies that might speak to loneliness. The importance of agency and permission were highly evident in people's responses. For example, prototypes that communicated long-distance with others usually included a 'secondary' text or voice-based message to ask and receive permission to send a touch, or to reassure the receiver of the sender's intentions to comfort or support, rather than invade.

Participant textile ribbon prototype – programmable with a range of touch sensations.

Contrary to the majority of existing digital touch designs aimed at loneliness, many people's prototypes in fact did not focus on connecting with other people over physical distance (or take the

form of robopet companions, another common technology in this space). People's responses instead emphasised other kinds of independent strategies for managing loneliness: in other words, agency over touch, and over how one managed one's loneliness, was highly important to people. For example, one prototype consisted of a textile ribbon that could be programmed with a range of touch sensations that would "make a new language possible". This framed digital touch as an independent and ongoing process – part of the participant's making practice that acted as a 'bridge' between them feeling lonely and feeling connected. They also articulated the importance of touch in other ways, enjoying feeling a slight 'electric shock' through visually juxtaposing the colourfully patterned textile scraps of the ribbon. This example particularly resonated in my conversation with Shields, who similarly expressed a capacity to feel touched by colour, and who had chosen to make the *Hug a Hoodie* sculptures in green because of its "grounding" effect.

As noted, people in my research also articulated proximity and physical presence as a form of interpersonal touch; something that Shield's sculptures likewise offer. Visitors and resident artists alike have found value in the communal experience of resting on the bean bags, and simply being around each other in calm and still stretches of time.

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We all of us have our own tactile boundaries, and these vary in relation to time, socio-cultural context, and who or what we are interacting with. Most of us are not used to thinking or talking about touch experiences – and the opportunities, methods, and tools to help us reflect on them are rare. As the examples in this Turf text have shown, creating these through art and research is important to help us better understand and articulate what matters to us about touch, and why.