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## *Touching the Unknown: Sensory Dissonance as a Means of Challenging Embodied Comfort Zones*

*Kadri Liis Rääk*

### ***Abstract***

The article explores the role of tactile interaction in disrupting conventional sensory hierarchies by enhancing experiential engagement with art. Through a practice-based research approach, the study investigates how tactile encounters with artworks can provoke perceptual shifts and challenge normative ideologies. Drawing on theories of affect and texture by Eve Sedgwick, cultural orientations by Sara Ahmed, and phenomenological perspectives in atmospheres, the article examines how sensory dissonance can expose cultural norms and foster new ways of understanding.

The article is situated within the context of expanded scenography, focusing on performative and affective qualities of space. Two installations, *Xarcadia* and *Exopoiesis*, serve as case studies showing the potential of tactile art to evoke strong emotional responses, disrupt comfort zones, and invite deeper engagement. By encouraging tactile interaction, these installations reveal the layered, often ambiguous nature of touch and its capacity to connect internal and external realities. The research highlights the importance of integrating touch into art to create more inclusive and dynamic sensory experiences, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced appreciation of tactile engagement in artistic practices. The article exemplifies and provides an example to the broader discussion within new scenography theory, which emphasizes performative and atmosphere-aware research.

### ***Keywords***

Touch, affect theory, affective atmospheres, phenomenology, sensory dissonance, scenographics.

## *Introduction*

Touch is considered one of the primordial senses that play an integral part in understanding human beings' experience and understanding of space. The paper explores sensory dissonance as a method for investigating the effects of disrupting our physical comfort zones, drawing on Eve Sedgwick's insights into affect and texture, Sara Ahmed's theories on cultural stickiness and orientations, and phenomenological approaches to a body's interaction with the world through affective atmospheres. It is quite common that the experience of art exhibitions and performances is meant to be perceived by the "higher senses" of vision, hearing, and cognition, while touching is typically discouraged. My practice-based research inverts this principle by encouraging tactile interaction, fostering perceptual shifts in participants, and reconceptualizing artworks as instruments for uncovering knowledge.

Artistic researcher Henk Borgdorff posits that as long as the works of art and their concepts remain vague, they create tension— "stretching towards the unknown, they become tools to promote research".<sup>1</sup> Combining Borgdorff's understanding of epistemic matters with the concept of tacit knowledge creates the kind of awareness that allows thinking to merge into objects and objects, in turn, into thoughts. For me as an artistic researcher, this kind of inquiry aligns with a post-qualitative or, more precisely, a performative research paradigm.<sup>2</sup> This approach offers a way to pluralize theories and methods, while knowledge is created by the entanglement of the researcher with the phenomena under study. This yields hybrid, indistinct forms of knowledge, advancing research despite its elusive nature. For the pursuit of this paper, I am embracing the slippery and ever-elusive qualities that my positioning offers. I am questioning the kind of information the artworks carry besides what they physically "show" and the different phenomenological modes of accessing this knowledge. My questions are: what kind of sensory experiences can a tactile encounter with an artwork create and how they can expose normativities and challenge ideologies? In the following, the paper will outline the research theoretically, highlight the various dimensions of touch and move on to affective

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<sup>1</sup> Borgdorff 2012, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Arlander, 2018; Bolt, 2016; Haseman 2006; Jamouchi, 2019; Østern et al., 2019.

atmospheres and dissonant experiences.

Being a creative researcher in spatial and material practices, I am interested in expanded scenography, which encompasses diverse fields and methods to examine society's spatial organization, focusing on performative, narrative, aesthetic, and cognitive elements.<sup>3</sup> It goes beyond traditional theatre, using scenographic principles to create temporary, dramaturgically designed spaces that may include participatory and performative aspects.<sup>4</sup> A vital addition to this discourse has been made by the cultural scenographer Rachel Hann, whose seminal book *Beyond Scenography* introduces the concept of "scenographics", that involves extraordinary events that interrupt or enrich everyday normality outside of the theatre.<sup>5</sup> By focusing on what scenographics *does* rather than what it *is*, it provides a framework for understanding the affective, experiential qualities of spaces and events. The art historian Astrid Von Rosen emphasizes that Hann's concept combines "new materialism, affect and assemblage theory, queer phenomenology, with concepts such as othering (rendering strange) and worlding (crafting worldly encounters), that separates scenography from everyday occurrences, thus opening up speculative worlds that offer new insights into being".<sup>6</sup>

Positioning the research in the performative paradigm and incorporating the affective and atmospheric qualities of scenographics, my study focuses on the multisensorial, material, and felt dimensions of spatial contingencies. To situate this research, the paper begins by clarifying the different aspects of touch, drawing upon a range of sources that offer insights into the historical, experiential, and artistic dimensions. The concepts of affect and sensory dissonances will also be discussed in the pursuit of their potential to disrupt or challenge our comfort zones.

### *Historical and Philosophical Views on Touch*

From historical studies to experiential and existential perspectives, scholars have explored the intricate nature of touch and its significance in our understanding of the world. The ability to

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<sup>3</sup> More in McKinney; Joslin (eds.) 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Expanded scenography research group

<sup>5</sup> Hann 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Von Rosen 2021, 68.

sense touch and react accordingly is the foundation of life for sensory beings.<sup>7</sup> As noted by philosopher Mika Elo, touch, as a sense modality, has both been overvalued and undervalued in Western culture, leading to contradictory perceptions and expectations surrounding its role and potential.<sup>8</sup> Touch has been seen as “vague, vulgar, and impure”,<sup>9</sup> primarily due to its direct qualities. Placing touch lower in the sense hierarchy can be traced back to Aristotle, who wrote: “Touch and taste are concerned with such pleasures as are shared by animals too (which is why they are regarded as low and brutish).”<sup>10</sup> The haptic modality functions on the borderline between the internal and external; through tactility, it is possible to elicit sensations of repulsion or pleasure that are closely tied to memory. Touch is a two-way experience: when we touch something, we not only feel something outside of ourselves, be it an object or another person, but we feel ourselves touching. Perceiving a tactile object is like diving into the unknown, an attempt to surface associations and memories associated with the haptic sense.<sup>11</sup> There are various angles from which touch has been investigated throughout history, the focus on sensory interaction with art being particularly relevant to this research.

A thorough historical and cultural overview has been conducted by David Howes, whose contribution brings together diverse perspectives on the role of the senses in different societies.<sup>12</sup> Constance Classen examines the cultural history of touch, noting its influence on cultural perceptions and art.<sup>13</sup> Artist and researcher Rosalynn Driscoll<sup>14</sup> investigates the connective and creative aspects of bodily senses in visual arts, while scholars such as Serres,<sup>15</sup> Elo, and Luoto<sup>16</sup> offer philosophical perspectives, providing a framework for understanding tactile engagement with the world as well as with art and media. Touch is essential in communication, as it can “bring distant objects and people into proximity” while being

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<sup>7</sup> Purves 2018, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Elo 2018, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle 1976, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Rääk 2020/101-2.

<sup>12</sup> Howes 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Classen 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Driscoll 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Serres 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Elo; Luoto 2018.

“receptive, expressive, and can communicate empathy”.<sup>17</sup> Despite its significance, the increasing digitization of society risks reducing our tactile engagement, potentially leading to a greater disconnect from our environment. The need to integrate touch with art is evident, as it opens up new sensory experiences and emotional responses. Recognizing the power of touch to connect our internal and external realities, this research argues for a more nuanced framework to articulate the multifaceted nature of touch.

### *Touch in Art and Installation*

In the classical sense, it is still imperative to perceive artworks mostly through vision and cognition. Classen points out that before the age of rationalism, other senses, especially touch, were given much more importance than nowadays. Before the modern museum, the public would be invited to visit private collections by going on a tour with curators, who explained the objects and offered them up for handling. To truly understand the objects on display, people used to hold them, observe their weight and texture, and often kiss them. Handling the artworks allowed visitors to intimately experience the inner nature of the object. Back then, the word for “seeing” could denote experiencing or perceiving more generally and could encompass a variety of sensory modalities. While sight required distance from the object, touch allowed a physical unification of the observer and the observed.<sup>18</sup>

The modern shift in tactile art took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, when novel experimental works were created by the Dadaists and Futurists. An in-depth analysis of tactility linked to imagination has been carried out by the Czech artist Jan Švankmajer, highlighting several avant-garde practitioners, including Max Ernst, Louis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Guillaume Apollinaire, amongst others, in his short anthology of tactile art.<sup>19</sup> Through his research, Švankmajer clarified the function of imagination in relation to art, emphasising Surrealism’s anti-aesthetic use of different materials as a way to unleash imagination into everyday life, creating more possibilities for deeper levels of consciousness to

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<sup>17</sup> Paterson 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Classen 2012

<sup>19</sup> Švankmajer 2014, 82-107.

arouse tactile emotions.<sup>20</sup> In the field of contemporary art, there are several artists who work with dissonance-inducing experiences that are connected to the visceral, affective dimension. For example, Patricia Piccinini creates deeply ambivalent, life-like sculptures that evoke strong emotional responses. Her chimeric biological creatures serve as metaphors for various “others”, fostering empathetic interactions and deeper engagement and understanding.<sup>21</sup>

### *Dimensions of Touch*

The sensory geographer Paul Rodaway distinguishes four dimensions of touch, each giving distinct and detailed information about the environment—global touch, reach-touch, extended, and imagined touch. Global touch is closely linked with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of a subject’s body and consciousness as being inherently linked with its surroundings, as well as the idea of the body being the base of any experience, as summed up by Petersen.<sup>22</sup> Reach-touch relates to our personal sense of touch, using our limbs and fingers for exploring. In extended touch, the limbs are mediated with tools, such as a visually-impaired person’s cane. The dimension most related to my own tactile research is imagined touch, which is a haptic experience based on preconceived expectations and memory.<sup>23</sup> Surface textures and likenesses have the capacity to evoke imagined tactile sensations without direct contact. However, introducing the element of actual touch—the haptic experience—can enrich these sensations.

The pioneering queer theorist Eve Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of texture as a tool for understanding our relationality with the world. She states that perceiving a texture involves instant hypothesising about the object’s physical properties and potential interactions, such as whether it is “sedimented, extruded, laminated, granulated, polished, distressed, felted, or cued”, or if it will be tough or soft, or safe to “stack, to fold, to shred, to climb on, to stretch, to slide, to soak”.<sup>24</sup> Touch uniquely intertwines agency and passivity, as it involves active

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<sup>20</sup> Švankmajer 2014, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Piccinini

<sup>22</sup> Petersen 2015, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Rodaway 2002, 48-54.

<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 13-14.

engagement—reaching, fondling, tapping, enfolding—while also recognizing the impact of previous interactions upon the textured object. Perceiving texture entails being constantly, instantly, and implicitly engaged in an active narrative that involves speculating, testing, and reinterpreting how physical attributes act and are affected across time.<sup>25</sup> Philosopher Michel Serres has noted that “the map on the epidermis most certainly expresses more than just touch, it plunges deeply into the internal sense, but it begins with the sense of touch. Thus, the visible tells more than just the visible.”<sup>26</sup> The different dimensions of touch may be accessed through engaging with my installations, with the addition of a guided or shared touch, which will be outlined and clarified with the case studies *Xarcadia* and *Exopoiesis*. First, it is crucial to understand the affective dimensions of touch in relation to sensory dissonance, which will be discussed next.

### *Affects and Dissonances*

According to media theorist Marie-Louise Angerer, the “primary concern” regarding affective studies “is the question of what happens, or what is produced through an encounter with other bodies?”<sup>27</sup> In this context, “bodies” refers to physical human bodies, collective and conceptual entities, post-human ethics, cultural interactions, and material impacts.<sup>28</sup> These encounters are often non-cognitive, pre-reflective, experiential bodily forces that flow and flux between individuals and their surroundings. Sedgwick points out that “affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects.”<sup>29</sup> Affects are ambiguous, ambivalent, and hard to pin down as subjects of research. There is a growing and changing vocabulary of affective expressions embedded in our everyday language. For example, “comfort zone” is a widely used term describing spaces or contexts in which individuals feel physically, emotionally, and existentially content. The term has its primary roots within social psychology, in Leon

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Serres 1998, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Angerer 2018, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 19.

Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory.<sup>30</sup> According to Festinger, individuals tend to experience a sense of discomfort when they find themselves simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs or values. This state of cognitive dissonance creates an internal conflict motivating individuals to actively seek ways to reduce this discomfort.<sup>31</sup> Contrary to the drive towards eliminating dissonance, Silvan Tomkins, the pioneering affect theorist, suggests that the imperfect alignment between our emotional, cognitive, and instinctual systems should rather be taken as a moving force towards improvement.<sup>32</sup> Through the lens of Tompkins, Sedgwick adds that welcoming the potential to be wrong about something has the ability to create the opportunity for discovery, innovation, and self-reflection.<sup>33</sup>

Adrian Mróz proposes that similar to cognitive dissonance, the concept of sensory dissonance can refer to the perceived phenomenon experienced in the vicinity of a "sensual otherness".<sup>34</sup> He suggests that the challenge is to enter into being with this dissonant feeling rather than automatically finding a way to resolve this inner conflict.<sup>35</sup> It can be argued that our cultural norms and surroundings significantly shape our physical sense of what is felt as "right" or "wrong". In an artistic context there is always a possibility to cater to the audience's preconceived expectations or challenge them, which, in turn, may run the risk of upsetting their sense of comfort. By making an active choice of staying with this dissonance, an individual may be guided towards changing their beliefs, even though it may be uncomfortable at first. The following section examines these concepts in more detail in relation to my creative practice.

### *Provocative Touch*

The first example to be discussed, *Xarcadia*,<sup>36</sup> was an immersive installation in an alternative, artist-run gallery Hoib, located in a residential building's basement. Created during the peak of COVID-19 restrictions, the installation unfolded as they began to ease. Considering the long

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<sup>30</sup> Brown 2008,

<sup>31</sup> Festinger 1957

<sup>32</sup> Tomkins 2008, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 107-8:

<sup>34</sup> Mróz 2019, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Xarcadia*. 28.01–28.02.2022.



yearning for public and social experiences during the restrictions, the exhibition managed to stir up some elevated curiosity and was reviewed in three newspapers.<sup>37</sup> The alternative space played a crucial part in the physical experience. The gallery was 15m<sup>2</sup> in size and, since restrictions were still imposed, visitors could only enter alone or in small groups. According to the gallerist Lilian Hiob, the range of visitors varied from the “usual” art crowd and people we knew, to unexpected visits from families or individuals drawn in by the media coverage. To be able to enter, first they had to book a visit by calling the gallerist. The performative elements started with the prospective visitor’s phone call, who made themselves known to be waiting in front of the building. This was followed by a journey descending into the maze-like architecture of a stranger’s building. As the visitors reached the basement, the gallerist gave a brief overview of the exhibition, including clear instructions for touching the artworks and exploring the space as much as one pleases, leaving them to experience the space alone.

The basement box used to be a poor family’s home, but it had been remodelled with white paint and a plywood wall while maintaining its cold, dim, and cellar-scented essence. The dissonance of the gallery–basement contrast was magnified by a huge red brick hearth with living vines growing out of it. This was the dwelling place of a somewhat humanoid hermit creature made from tufted wool and other materials, filled with lichens and ceramic invertebrates. There were three speakers incorporated into the space—one was inside the creature; one was inside a wall and the third in a furniture piece—orchestrated into an immersive soundscape resembling a dripping cave. The spatial installation consisted of ceramic masks, glazed drawings, and amorphous bodily objects, both soft and rough to the touch. The central elements were the sculptural furniture pieces that drew the space into a domestic *mise-en-scène*. One of them was a Marcel Breuer’s *Wassily chair*, which was modified and covered

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<sup>37</sup> Metsamärt *Postimees*, Laurits *Eesti Päevaleht*, Aarsalu *Müürileht*.

with a fleshy layer of soft folds, which extruded the artist's hair and skin-like leather.



*Figure 1. Kadri Liis Rääk, Modified Wassily chair at the Xarcadia exhibition, 2022. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo / CC BY-4.*

The forms resembled biological shapes such as cells, slime, fungi, breasts, and amoebas with their undefined features and structures. This immersive environment was further emphasized with lighting design, enshrouding the space in pink and orange hues. Additionally, one could take a designed paper artefact home with them, which had different emphases of the exhibition in poetic wording. The space was set up in a way that offered multiple entry points and means of orientation. The exploration of the tangible textures, either leathery or woven, slimy or rough, transported the visitor to a state that avoided clear focal points and conventional

hierarchies. The interpretation of participants' experiences was done by analysing reviews published in newspapers, with a focus on how the exhibition's sensorial experiences were perceived and, more specifically, articulated. The reviews provided rich textual insights that helped to move the research further by exemplifying and wording tacit and felt experiences.

### *Affective Atmospheres*

A key concept that arose from the reviews was the perception of an immersive atmosphere. The atmosphere was perceived as warm, but “a little eerie and ominous”,<sup>38</sup> which a reviewer for *Eesti Päevaleht*, Peeter Laurits, attributed to the aftermath of the traumatic isolation of the previous years. Philosopher Gernot Böhme notes that an atmosphere is not a thing in itself, but instead a lingering in-between things and perceiving subjects. The creation of atmospheres is limited to setting up the circumstances in which an atmosphere can arise.<sup>39</sup> The political geographer Ben Anderson emphasizes atmosphere's role as “spatially discharged affective qualities” that blur the lines between subjective and objective experiences.<sup>40</sup> He adds that “affective atmospheres are the tension between presence and absence, materiality and immaterial, and the subjective and objective.” As Böhme asserts, “atmospheres are involved wherever something is being staged, wherever design is a factor – and that now means: almost everywhere.”<sup>41</sup> This convergence of material and immaterial elements makes the concept of atmospheres essential for investigating ambivalent experiences and nonbinary thinking. While some of the elements on display were somewhat recognizable, most of the space was rather ambiguously defined. This interplay between what was known and what was unfamiliar created an appealing question—how do visitors contextualize ambivalent embodied experiences? Art critic Aleksander Metsamärt, after overcoming initial discomfort, epitomized this idea by removing his shirt and engaging with the artworks with his upper body, as described in *Postimees*, in order to intensify the experience. The visitor became an amalgamation of sensory organs— “eyes, fingertips, and slightly cold upper

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<sup>38</sup> Laurits *Eesti Päevaleht*.

<sup>39</sup> Böhme 2017, 161.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, 2009, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Böhme 2017, 2.

body providing a shift through which the exhibition can understand, deconstruct, and immerse itself.”<sup>42</sup> Taking the provocation even further and sliding his torso and fingers over the anti-reflective glass covering the drawings, this action became an active reshaping of art presentation, which led him to suggest that my practice could be “on the cusp of changing how art institutions are to be perceived and critiqued.”<sup>43</sup> I find this outcome fascinating, for it opens up the conversation on deeply-embedded institutional hierarchies while presenting a more nuanced, albeit unconventional method for facilitating these new modes of perception. In another review, published in *Müürileht*, Hanna Elsbeth Aarsalu conveyed her experiences as a dense description, depicting an intimate and detailed overview of various feelings and thoughts that arose as a free and unobstructed flow.<sup>44</sup> Emphasis was placed on her somatic sensations, describing the growing awareness of her body in the space, of various sounds and the changing light. The space brought about vivid connotations and reflections that created great leaps in time and space with imaginative associations. At one point, she was transported to a warm summer day, evoking memories of construction workers and dripping watermelons. The next moment, she was in Berlin, imagining “... an art gallery of soft and flickering material floating out of the Tiergarten against the background of cave sounds and rushing water!”<sup>45</sup> These insights bridged her embodied memories and perceptions, her social and historical background, and her present moment. This aligns with theatre scholar Stephen DiBenedetto’s thoughts, when he stated that “memory is embodied thinking, and only through an active awareness of sensorial stimuli can the experience begin to be spoken about, using language and cultural models of interpretation.”<sup>46</sup> The textural and tactile nature of the installation offered a wider sphere to navigate these vivid and bodily memories, offering a broad palette for associations.

### *Sticky Dialogues in Exopoiesis*

While *Xarcadia* emphasized immersive and personal encounters, the next installation,

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<sup>42</sup> Metsamärt *Postimees*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Metsamärt 2022, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Aarsalu 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Aarsalu 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Di Benedetto 2007, 128.

*Exopoiesis*,<sup>47</sup> explored embodied sensing within a more traditional gallery setting, challenging the conventional norms of interaction and perception. The name of the exhibition combines two words: *exo* (outer, external) and *poiesis*, “the process of something emerging that previously did not exist”, thus meaning an external self-creation. The exhibition took place on two floors – on the upper floor, artworks were presented in an “orderly” way on the walls, while the descent downstairs created a more intimate and immersive atmosphere, with objects deviating from the normative path, sprouting and bulging from the crevices. The installation consisted of a considerable number of objects of various forms and diverse materials. A large part of the work was created by the bodily actions of very time-intensive and energy-demanding hand techniques. There were five frame-like objects, which were created by prodding, pulling, excavating and pinching, rolling, adding and removing materials; and then stacking, cutting away, and adding them up again. Through these movements, traces of my hands were imprinted into the works, offering a chance for other people’s fingers to follow the paths left by my actions. The range of materials relied on the speculative idea of materials imagining a new physicality—they simultaneously took shapes and revealed something of themselves — they became bodily.

As a research method, I conducted both covert and guided observations in the gallery for at least two hours at a time. There were also guided tours that I took with students and teachers from the Estonian Academy of Arts, plus also with friends, relatives, and curators. One intriguing piece was crafted from an unusual, flesh-like material: a silicone breast prosthesis. Throughout my observations, it was noticeable that the prosthesis simultaneously repulsed and fascinated visitors, prompting them to touch it. It appeared that many presumed that the object was uniformly solid, perhaps made of ceramic, leading to startled reactions upon feeling its unexpected texture. Another common behaviour was a general hesitance to interact with the objects. The prosthesis, typically used by transgender women or those who have undergone mastectomies to aid confidence and alleviate body dysphoria, carries no intrinsic cultural or social weight. Yet, its bodily association evoked a strong reluctance to touch it. This reaction persisted

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<sup>47</sup> *Exopoiesis*, 05.–30.04.2023.

even though the object's original purpose was obscured and the material altered; the emotional resonance seemed ingrained in its substance. The powerful, almost visceral, responses to the silicone piece highlighted the significant effect that the mere prospect of touch could provoke. This kind of sensory contradiction and aversion was similarly noted with other materials that provoked unexpected tactile sensations.



*Figure 2. Kadri Liis Rääk, Breast at the Exopoiesis exhibition, 2023. Photo: Harry Tiits / CC BY-4.*

### *Disgust*

The interest in psychological unpleasantness and the performativity of disgust has been examined by several authors starting with Darwin.<sup>48</sup> Even though the etymology of “disgust”

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<sup>48</sup> See Darwin 1965, 256–7; Miller 2005, 335–54; Ahmed 2004, 82–100; Švankmajer 2014.



was initially connected to “bad taste”, it has evolved into an affect that works between all kinds of bodies and objects.<sup>49</sup> Ahmed argues that “disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving the desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent” stating that it is about how bodies and things touch and get close to each other.<sup>50</sup> Regarding the silicone prosthesis, it was not the object itself that was perceived as disgusting, but rather the intimate tactile interaction with it elicited feelings of disgust. Ahmed suggests that disgust is not merely an internal emotion but an intense physical sensation that interacts with external surfaces and objects.<sup>51</sup> When participants touched the silicone, the boundaries between the object and the self seemed to shift, leaving the individual in a momentary state of confusion and discomfort. Looking at these experiences through a phenomenological lens, ambivalent and subjective experiences are quite hard to communicate verbally. Drawing on the work of feminist scholar Joanna Frueh, Di Benedetto acknowledges that “to describe precisely the subjective impressions of sensations, a more poetic or sensual language is necessary.”<sup>52</sup> Frueh proposes that it is more appropriate to describe bodily engagement with erotic language because it loosens academic jargon and can be as “sloppy and intimate as sex,” calling for subjective, image-driven language that can capture the fleeting sensations of phenomenological encounters.<sup>53</sup>

While analysing the written reviews of both exhibitions, the language used was remarkably sensory, using terms like carnal, sensual, or asexual carnality. Comparing *Exopoiesis* with Japanese tentacle porn, artist Urmas Lüüs revealed in *Vikerkaar*, that “the same sensory tickles were creeping under the skin as when he gets wet or hard while watching porn.”<sup>54</sup> Additionally, using terms like gooey, clammy, ooze, snotty, slimy, or dripping, the texts revealed a vocabulary most commonly associated with things that disgust. Disgust is mainly characterized by the qualities of consistency and feel, as stated by historian William Ian Miller, adding that the

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<sup>49</sup> Miller 2005, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed 2014, 84–5.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmed 2014, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Di Benedetto 2007, 124.

<sup>53</sup> Frueh 1996, 9.

categorization of disgust is closely linked to our shared ideas on purity and contamination.<sup>55</sup> Ahmed expands the notion of disgust and stickiness to include a wider cultural and political framework, noting how “stickiness becomes an affective quality of objects”,<sup>56</sup> where affects “stick” to bodies, linking them to inequalities.<sup>57</sup> The aversion to touching the particular flesh-like material points to the fact that disgust is deeply tangled up with cultural norms. This includes how certain behaviours are encouraged or discouraged based on the perceived norms of the space, which ties back to Ahmed’s idea of bodies being spatially oriented in certain ways.

### *Experiential and Guided Touch*

Going beyond material provocations, *Exopoiesis* also explored performative aspects of touch. The notion of performativity in contemporary art has been explored and contested by Dorothea von Hantelmann in *The Experiential Turn*.<sup>58</sup> She argues that performativity underscores art as a process of transformation rather than a fixed product, reflecting broader cultural trends that value experiences and interactions. Rather, she suggests the term “experiential” as more suitable for analysing processes of creating and experiencing art. This perspective positions the participant’s engagement as central to the creation and interpretation of art. She argues that the meaning of art emerges through interaction between the artwork and the audience, highlighting the importance of the temporal and spatial context of the encounter.

In *Xarcadia*, touching was unobstructed by a stranger’s gaze, the visitors had time to orient themselves intimately, which created a much greater likelihood of affective, even provocative engagements. This resulted in introspective moments of awareness, communicated by vivid, imaginative, almost erotic language. While all the reviewers expressed some feelings of unease or uncanniness regarding the experiences, there was more willingness to share the intimacy of the dissonant experience. In that, it was invaluable as a research tool for understanding

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<sup>54</sup> Lüüs 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Miller 2005, 337–40.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmed 2004, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>58</sup> von Hantelmann 2014.



individual affects towards artworks.



*Figure 3: Performers in Exopoiesis, still from a video documentation of Exopoiesis. Photo: Roman-Sten Tõnissoo / CC BY-4.*

In *Exopoiesis*, tactile engagement varied across two distinct scenarios of phenomenological and affective engagement. Although the objects were meant to be touched, clear instructions were not presented due to the technical limitations of the gallery, and much like the guides in the early museums, tactile tours were carried out by being present and guiding the visitors personally. Despite the objects being non-tactile for general visitors, an interaction was facilitated at the opening as a two-hour durational performance, transforming the objects and performers into a focal point and the gallery into a stage.

In this setup, tactile encounters were shaped by the premeditated actions of the performers. During the performance, there was little tactile engagement by the gallery visitors, which could be attributed to the collective spectatorial dimension. In the case of guided touch, as I have found, the experience was focused more on the materials and appearances of objects, which steered visitors away from connecting with their bodily senses. Then again, the guiding presence and specifications created a kind of “safe zone” for visitors who would otherwise be reluctant to engage physically. Additionally, by adding a guided touch to the usual exhibition

visit, the experience was also more accessible to the visually impaired. While I find it to be a highly relevant angle to be researched further, it falls outside the scope of this paper.

### *Conclusion*

The examples described in the article presented different phenomenological approaches to encountering tactile artworks in scenographics— by provocative, intimate, experiential, and guided touch. The tactile and affective atmospheres of the installations aimed to disrupt normative sensory hierarchies, inviting participants to engage with their surroundings in a more embodied manner. This gave the participants the chance to experience and reflect on the complex interplay of sensory perception, affect, and cultural norms. By engaging with artworks through touch, participants were invited to navigate their discomfort and visceral reactions, which led to moments of vivid bodily memories, sensorial dissonance, and even disgust. By applying the principles of place orientation and affective atmospheres, there were dynamic and constantly shifting elements, which allowed for fluid experiences to unfold.

It is important to highlight the fact that instead of avoiding bodily or sensory discomfort, tactile encounters with culturally and sensorially provocative materials can broaden the discussion of divergent physicality, which can help overcome the initial disturbing sense of the unknown. The tactile experiences facilitated by these installations also carry significant cultural implications. The discomfort and dissonant reactions with the breast prosthesis in *Exopoiesis* exemplified the presence of a cultural dissonance, where normative sensory hierarchies and ideological beliefs were disrupted. This disruption can challenge participants' comfort zones by revealing how cultural norms shape sensory and emotional experiences, inviting them to critically question the origins and influence of these norms. Theoretically this aligns with Hann, who writes that "scenographics irritate the disciplined orders of the world."<sup>59</sup> This can also be viewed through the lens of Ahmed's (2014) exploration of affect and cultural politics, which shows how sensory experiences are embedded within broader social and cultural contexts.

A further novel finding is that by allowing people to touch the artworks, there is the

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<sup>59</sup> Hann 2019, viii.

possibility to offer alternative modes of relating to the environment—the artwork becomes a site for embodied exploration, encouraging participants to engage with their senses and bodily reactions in novel ways. This was exemplified by one of the reviewer’s actions in *Xarcadia* – by ignoring all of the conventional norms of being and acting in a gallery in a “proper” way, he unleashed a completely unexpected way of approaching artworks, and institutions. By orienting a space’s scenographics to be more inclusive to diverse sensory experiences, it challenges the exclusivity of art spaces and makes them more accessible to people with different sensory preferences and abilities. But the threshold of acceptance needs to be consistently taught and learned through continuous exposure to divergent points of contact, which tactile art contexts can provide. However, the paper also acknowledges potential limitations: the unsettling power of discomfort may create a gap between artistic intent and participants’ reception, potentially alienating them. While sensory dissonance can indeed reveal new interpretative avenues, it also risks excluding audiences unprepared for or resistant to unfamiliar experiences.

The exploration of sensory dissonance in artistic contexts offers several avenues for future research and practice. One significant direction is the investigation of tactile art’s accessibility, by broadening the research to touch upon neurodivergence, where sensations and reactions are extremely varied in terms of sensitivity. This area needs more thorough investigation but can be invaluable in discussing embodiment, physical proximity, and safe atmospheres in art and performance, facilitating the creation of more inclusive experiences.

For me as a researcher working on the in-betweens, the becoming, and the unknowns, creative practice is a place of continuous discovery. In line with the ideas of a performative research paradigm, it can be concluded that it fosters an inclusive, dynamic space for creativity, experimentation, and diverse methods without imposing restrictive frameworks, which can hinder the elusiveness of artistic research. Embracing and examining multisensory experiences, incorporating artistic knowledge, and by challenging academic norms, this approach provides possible examples of methods of knowledge inquiry that match the complexity of affective and emotional life. I am captivated by Serres’ “philosophy of mingled bodies”, in which to be in the world is not about standing next to it, but rather “the body mingles with the world and itself,

overflows its borders.”<sup>60</sup> Bodies, objects, and materials become one socio-cultural conversation, where each of them can highlight the other’s impediments. The role of artistic research in this process is to create the tools for thinking to counter humanity’s social, ecological, and existential crises. The capacity to mingle with the unknown demands openness and courage to change opinions and develop empathy towards them.

### *Author*

Kadri Liis is an interdisciplinary artist and junior researcher with a focus on touch and tactility as a means of experiencing space in art. In her practice, she combines scenography and speculative design methods, exploring the expanded fields of art, design, and performance, putting emphasis on creating immersive, multimodal experiences. She has studied scenography (BA) and contemporary art (MA) at the Estonian Academy of Arts and autonomous design (MA) at the Royal Academy of Arts Ghent (KASK). She has participated in exhibitions and residencies in Peru, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, and Estonia.

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<sup>60</sup> Serres 2009, 3.

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