Can you Handle this?

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Abstract

Over the course of a day we meet countless materials and objects but rarely consider these surfaces of negotiation within the everyday environment. If we consider gestures as a language, then the actions we perform and the surfaces we encounter result in conversations with our surroundings. Where body meets details inside architecture, the commonplace ritual occurs.

I will discuss the importance of touch in response to my finished work in *Can you Handle this?* but also during the making process.

Key Words
Tool
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Body
Jewellery
Interface
Tactility
Wearing
Everyday
Intimacy
Gesture
Key Question

How can I highlight our relationship with everyday objects through touch and gesture?

Introduction

“Hands are underrated. Eyes are in charge, mind gets all the study, and heads do all the talking. Hands type letters, push mice around, and grip steering wheels, so they are not idle, just underemployed.”

In an age in which the ritual has become something we explore through the use of our digital devices, the intimate relationship we have with everyday objects is at risk of becoming warped. To understand this, I explore how we build connections with everyday objects and world around us through the sense of touch. Through doing this, I aim to highlight the ritualistic gestures we perform in the domestic environment, giving agency to these invisible encounters.

Using the smartphone as a point of departure, I focus on the hand as one location on the body associated with the use of these ubiquitous devices and seek to redefine this as a site for another type of connection.

My Master Project, Can you Handle this? explores ways of connecting us to our surroundings by evoking the desire to touch and engage in a playful way. I examine behaviours around tactility in the public space and what this could mean to the world of Contemporary Jewellery and Craft. As the handle is usually the first point of contact between body and architecture, I chose to start here.

Background

Digital devices are so intertwined in our daily lives, we are a society dependent on our smartphones. Advancements in technology enable us to instantaneously connect with people all over the world at the touch of a button or swipe of a screen. Simultaneously, these same devices can create an insular experience, building a barrier between the individual and those directly in front of them. At the start of my master project, I made a series of jewellery objects titled Swipe to Unlock as a response to some of these behaviours around the digital world.

Form, colour and material choices of digital devices are often similar; mobile phones, tablets and wearable technology are presented as sleek, metallic objects. Smart phones are presented as palm sized rectangular machines, comprised of aluminium, glass and plastic. This futuristic aesthetic shared by most gadgets is far removed from our own flawed human bodies and yet we are often guilty of placing greater trust in devices than the people around us, for example: the use of GPS mapping to search for directions or the compulsion to fact check through search engines. Even when we are sure of the answer, we seek reassurance from computers. These unthreatening, black boxes, presented as user-friendly touch screens lure us to safety.

This series of objects were sometimes designed to be handled alone, with others requiring two bodies to fully engage. These jewellery related objects encouraged communication and moments of connection through physical interaction, as opposed to the online ‘sharing’ society has become accustomed to. By highlighting the difficulties we often have in communicating, I set out to present an alternative set of recovery tools, allowing users to administer the antidote. Gestures, such as tap, swipe, scroll, were adopted from typical smartphone use and harnessed to allow the audience to discover the properties of a different kind of device.

The intention of the project was to create objects which would provide the user with an unexpected reaction from engagement with the object. Sparking an instantaneous moment of connection between user and object in attempt to recreate the feeling of elation as your phone vibrates in your pocket. These tactile pieces placed emphasis on the viewer to mute one channel of communication and create time for more intimate shared experiences.

Following on from Swipe to Unlock, my master project has opened up to a wider discussion about how we perceive tactility in the world around us in a post-digital age.
Mapping the gesture

Twist the door handle
Slide open the drawer
Push the key inside the lock
Flick the light switch
Press the button
Push the door closed
Tap your travel card
Lift the lid
Turn the tap on
Turn the tap off
Pull the chain
Ring the bell
Walk into the room
Open the letterbox
Sit down
Wipe your feet on the mat

Gesture as ritual

The gesture is a way to both define and understand something our body meets through touch and movement. Gestures connect us with the material world around us as well as to the different habits building up the inner structures in everyday life. The hand grips a handle as we subconsciously encounter surface and material. As identified in the essay ‘An Emotional Perspective on Everyday Life’ by Anders Ljungberg “The chain of agreements between our intellect, our body and the functional object that results in action takes place in silence and without us paying further attention to it.” These behaviours, when repeated and reinforced over time, can shift from the habitual to the invisible.

A ritual can be defined as a series of actions or type of behaviour regularly and invariably followed by someone. The act of opening a door, in itself is not a ritual, but can be looked upon as a new beginning, as we physically and mentally move into a new space. This transformation is a loaded moment, with a clear before and after. Taking these cues from ongoing everyday life, I remove these details, alter and reinsert them back into their environment. This disruption offers us a way to understand how we move, as bodies, through spaces.

Performative actions and common place rituals can help us understand our relationship with the world around us, but often go unnoticed. Once I started to map these gestures, I began noticing them everywhere. Routine actions navigate us through our day.

The buildings and structures around us are directly related to the body. The doors we pass through are sized to easily accommodate the average person. The door handle is the meeting point between the building and the body. The size and shape of the handle comfortably sits in the palm of the hand, providing us with a firm grip on our surroundings. The handle is therefore not only a practical tool used to pass through an opening, it encompasses the sense of touch.

Images 5-9: Silcock, S., Handling, 2018
2 Astrup Bull, K., Gali, A., Material Perceptions, 2018
3 The Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2018
In a time when the ritual has become something we explore through the use of our devices, the gestures we perform and our subsequent expectations are in a state of flux. The virtual objects displayed in a smartphone app are often rooted in the physical world; the use of recognisable forms helps the user navigate around the interface. By flicking switches, tapping buttons and turning the page of a book, the audience can move around the app with ease. The digital world mimics the gestures we perform IRL.

Our sense of touch has been altered by the intimate relationships we have with our smartphones. The touch we experience through a screen is impermeable, a depiction of tactility which we can never access:

Here, touch has been reduced to one thing: texture. And that texture is flat and cold as glass. The content beyond the screen may seem infinitely malleable, allowing us to pinch and flick, zoom out to a satellite view, or swoop in at street level. But the interface is never more than a flattened approximation of our most tactile sense. We touch these intuitive surfaces but they do not touch us back.

Interrupting the everyday

Situating my work within the public space opens up possibilities for moments of tactility in social spaces. By working site specific, I observe and establish locations where the body encounters the building.

By removing and reframing objects from lived lives, I seek to create intimacy in the everyday touch. Replacing the known with the unknown. Displacing these elements and then returning them back to their original location creates a sense of uncanny, allowing these elements to be seen in a new light.

Placement of the handles is something I am carefully considering as a way to guide sensory engagement. Where possible, I will install the handles in locations which disrupt the audience’s journey through the building, providing an understanding that the pieces are to be touched, for example, by replacing existing handles within the building.

When identifying the areas of connection between body and building, I began to focus on handles and light switches and began to cast from them in acrystal and silicone. In some cases, I directly altered the surface of the existing handles.

In this particular instance, I removed a recognisable ‘Konstfack’ handle (see image 15), covered it in blue flock, then replaced it on the door at the entrance to room V1. I observed and photographed the resulting breakdown of materials which occurred over a period of days. As a consequence of interaction through touch, the fibres became compressed and the light teal colour became more of a moss green.

During this project, I have tested these methods of replacement and disruption within the confines of the Konstfack building, in some cases forcing the audience to come into contact with the pieces. This performative aspect allows me to choreograph movement through interaction with the objects.
Artist Richard Wentworth documents and frames chance encounters between seemingly mundane objects and their surroundings. Wentworth’s photography series Making Do and Getting By celebrates the human encounter and improvisational ‘bodge job’ of objects undergoing transformation.

Wentworth registers these encounters without interference; whereas in my work, I consciously transform these details by altering form, colour and surface. This transformation allows me to deviate from the traditional handle form, towards something unrecognisable, while still identifiable as a tool by which to open, pull or push.
Traces of touch

The handle is a carrier of memories; the slow erosion of a surface as a result of the many hands it comes into contact with. Over the course of time, the varnish of a wooden handle will wear away or develop a gradual patina. A demonstration of all the hands which handle.

These details are worn on the building to promote touch and interaction with material. Counteracting the hierarchy of sight as the dominant sense, emphasis is placed on creating and strengthening bonds through touch.

This hierarchy of the senses is identified by J Pallasmaa in *The Eyes Of The Skin*. Pallasmaa discusses the neglect and underappreciation of touch as a sense in a world where sight and hearing are dominant, perhaps creating a need for connection between material and skin.

“There is no doubt that our technological culture has ordered and separated the senses even more distinctly. Vision and hearing are now the privileged social senses, whereas the other three are considered as archaic sensory remnants with a merely private function, and they are usually suppressed by the code of culture.”

As a craftsperson, I draw knowledge from the hand; my body encounters objects with a focus on the tactile understanding of materiality. My approach of thinking through making allows me to process ideas, while reflecting upon behaviours occurring within the space.

While interaction is something I deem important, I am aware this is not how all audiences will experience my work within the gallery setting. We are accustomed to the imposed rules and limitations of the white cube, where “please do not touch” is the norm we adhere to. With an awareness of this societal norm, I have been using video as a tool to communicate the sensation of interacting with the pieces and to further instruct to the viewer that they are permitted to do so.

The images shown are stills from a recent video I made demonstrating interaction with some of my previous work. I plan to film a similar short video incorporating pieces from *Can you Handle this?* which will be shown alongside the physical work in the Spring Show. The pieces contrast against brightly coloured backdrops and long, red false nails move into shot, inciting sensual interaction with the crafted object.

The video I plan to make will be shot in a similar style; presenting the handles lying dormant, while the hand moves into shot to activate. In this upcoming video piece, I will demonstrate the functional aspect of the handles by attaching them directly to doors and using push and pull motions to activate them.

This aesthetic of the video (pictured right) borrows from that of Instagram ‘slime’ accounts, this recent internet phenomenon features mesmerising clips of well-manicured fingers kneading gelatinous blobs of slime, all shot through a smartphone camera lens. This disconnect of experiencing tactility through the frame of the screen is something which I find fascinating.

The concept of the ‘Digital Native’ was coined by Marc Prensky in his 2001 paper *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. Prensky underlines the generational gap between those born before the rise of digital technologies and those born after, placing them in one of two categories; as either ‘Digital Natives’ or ‘Digital Immigrants’. Although these terms could be deemed simplistic and have become somewhat cliche, Prensky offers an understanding of how different groups within society experience the digital world, either with fluency or as a second language, and how this translates to other areas of our lives. According to Prensky, digital immigrants use technology in a different way, by not speaking in their native tongue, things become lost in translation. An example given by Prensky is that a Digital Immigrant may print a text they need to edit, then re-type with alterations, rather than working directly onto the digital document.

Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants was written from a pedagogical perspective, although I believe the concept can be applied to some of the themes I discuss in this paper. Reflecting upon my own work, these lines of distinction may offer an understanding of how likely different audiences are to engage with my work and how they experience tactility.
Shaping Material

Mix until pigment has dispersed
Clamp securely
Leave to harden overnight
Press the button
Squeeze clay between my hands
Paint a thin layer of glue
Dust flocking fibres
Boil leather until soft
Place upon the kiln shelf
Pour into the mould
Slice around the edge
Weigh out in a ratio of 1:10
File along the join
Thread the needle with cotton
Hammer until round
Spray two even coats
Pop the air bubbles
Dust with talc
Anneal until soft

Material and Making

As digital production advances, our relationship with material is shifting. As some Craftspeople down traditional tools in favour of the digital, the once crucial engagement between body and material is becoming dissonant. Although the hand is still employed to control the digital tool (for example: when applying strokes of colour with the paintbrush tool in Adobe Illustrator), when we meet the material through the screen, it does not employ the tacit knowledge which craftspeople rely upon. I have chosen to forego the use of any digital technology (i.e. 3D printing, laser cutting etc.) in my master project, working with machine and hand tools in a bid to remain close to the materials themselves.

When selecting materials for this project, it was important to use those which hold qualities of plasticity. As a jeweller, this has meant abandoning metal, for the most part. Clay has played an important role in this project, as a pliable material, which is easily manipulated by the hand and doesn’t necessarily require specific tools. Once fired in the kiln, clay undergoes transformation, marks of finger and thumb are trapped on its surface, encapsulating a frozen moment.

I apply layers of tactile material to these ceramic forms, surrounding the clay body like a second skin. The marks, dents and thumbprints become masked in a layer of bres. I use flocking as one of these ‘skins’ – a velvet like texture which can be applied by depositing small textile fibres onto a surface.

As well as a raw material, clay is used to build one part moulds, into which I pour casting materials, such as silicone. Handles are given form as negatives of clay moulds, I shape the clay by hand and pour directly into this manipulated shell.

Image 22: Silcock., S. Flocking process, 2018
Image 23: Silcock., S. Flocked surface, 2018
Jewellery of the building

Unlike clothing, which acts as a protective layer from the outside elements, jewellery possesses no apparent function. When worn on the body, it touches the skin, occupying the boundary between the intimate personal space of the body and the outside world. Jewellery is a way of conveying our sense of identity; a wearer communicates to the world through the act of wearing. We embed sentiment and narrative to the pieces we wear. In her project Urban Jewellery, Liesbet Bussche interjects in urban landscapes, adorning the streets with what she describes as “jewels in the city”. Referencing iconic items of jewellery, for example: the pearl necklace, her work playfully interjects into the public space, resulting in large scale works which incorporate pre-existing structural features of the street or building. This humorous use of recognisable forms questions what it could mean to wear a space.

Bussche’s public works adorn the street, as the handles I make adorn interior details of the building. My pieces are fixed to doors and suspend from pipes, enhancing or altering the identity of the building. By taking ownership of the public space in this way, my work embeds itself into the interior of the building. I consider this body of work as ‘jewellery of the building’, a way to raise details which, through overuse, are almost invisible. When considering jewellery in this way, parallels can also be drawn between the smartphone and the handle. Both operate as an interface between the skin and beyond, a membrane between public and private. The use of brass and copper feet elevate the handles, forming a barrier between them and the building. I borrow from traditional jewellery techniques, treating handles as I would a precious stone. I secure the handles in bezel settings (also referred to as a ‘rub-over’ setting), which are often used in rings to hold a gemstone in place with a rim of metal arcing around the stone. This type of setting creates the illusion of a larger stone, which I use to frame and enhance the moment of interaction.

These brass and copper settings are then gold-plated, playing with notions of preciousness. The handles, with their brightly coloured synthetic surface become juxtaposed when cradled by the more traditionally ‘crafted’ metal settings. The polished gold surface elevates what is commonly perceived as the ‘lowly’ material, serving as a comment on the material hierarchy between the two elements.
Inviting interaction

Won’t hug me twice, a brooch by Jewellery Artist Anaïs Paulard explores jewellery as a site for human connection, both physical and emotional. The brooch is pinned to clothing of the wearer, inviting an embrace from those they come into contact with, daring them to compress the balloon suspended in the silver frame. Squeezed under pressure the balloon explodes, staining the skin and clothing of those involved; the deconstructed brooch and the transfer of coloured pigment present a narrative of what has occurred.

Similarly, the artist Jonathan Baldock employs the technique of activation through wearing in his work. Baldock’s hybrid works serve as both object and costume. His theatrical installations often feature an aspect of performance, in which ‘costumes’ or ‘props’ are worn by a performer, then rejoin their stage-like setting. Curator Kathy Noble describes the sensation of wearing one of such costumes during an interview she conducted with Baldock during his solo show *The Soft Machine* in 2004.

“A simple object; when engaged, it communicates to its user and could be considered to be momentarily alive. In comparison, most objects that we actually use with our hands or bodies have a purely practical role.”

This method of activation through wearing and performativity used by both of these artists is something I strive for in my own practice. I am interested in the physical changes which may occur to either to the object or the body (i.e: the pigment left on the skin in Anaïs Paulard’s work). Over time, layers of flock will wear away through touch to uncover the narrative of the making process and reveal marks of the hand underneath.

As a craftsperson working within the contemporary jewellery field, I have am very much interested in wearability and the relationships between object and body. In this project, I refer to *Can you Handle this?* as jewellery of the building but also consider the relationship between the body and my pieces. The negotiation between the site of engagement on the body (i.e: the hand) and the handle questions notions of wearing and suggests that by holding the handle, it becomes worn. The hand gripping the handle can be described as the act of ‘wearing’ in a broader sense, rather than ‘wearing’ of jewellery as it is most commonly known.

This close proximity between the pieces and the body, combined with the changes in physical characteristics of the handles over a period of time allows for emotional attachments to be formed with my handles.

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Conclusion

In both my making and written work, I form a dialogue about where craft could exist as a question about gesture, body and material.

Through material exploration and investigating the layers built upon or removed from the craft object, I discuss how our perception of tactility is undergoing change in a post-touchscreen world. I highlight objects through my use of material, form and colour, creating an awareness of tactility in the everyday. The handles I make are permeable, they provide the audience with response through touch, a feedback or perhaps unexpected reaction from the intended function of said object.

“They door pull is the handshake of the building, which can be inviting and corteous or forbidding and aggressive.”

Can you handle this?

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