

## Skin Hunger

### Touch, Dance, and Sharing in Times of Social Distancing

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*Sofia Muñoz Carneiro*

“Liberties and limits, options and taboos of touch give us insight into the aesthesis of different forms of dance, their dynamics, and communicative structure, as well as into the production and regulation of affects. However, the configurations of touch in the interaction of touching and being touched are as different and varied as the practices of dance themselves.” (Gabriele Brandstetter 2013: 3)

## Proliferations

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Nicolas Dutant asks: “How do you respond, as a philosopher, to this period in which, even if it is still thinkable, touching has become almost impossible? Doesn’t this deprivation leave us, in part, in a state of numbness?” (Nancy 2022: 79). Nancy’s response to this question is of particular interest when we think about how dance has found different forms of managing, confronting, and reinventing relationships between touch, sharing, and social distancing during the pandemic. On the one hand, Nancy does not deny the possibility of feeling numb in times of the pandemic. But, on the other hand, the author highlights the fact that there has also been stimulation, awakening, and mobilization in many other respects (Nancy 2022: 79). He refers to this as a “proliferation” of different forms of contacts and interactions during the pandemic (2022: 79). Nancy uses the term “proliferation” to signalize an always changing movement of propagation, multiplication, and expansion regarding touch, a movement that never rests, always swarming, twisting, and turning. In a somewhat

provocative way, Nancy suggests that “what is lacking is not touching, since is what is taking place, on the contrary, is a properly viral proliferation of contacts, messages, calls, suggestions, inventions [...] this proliferation is teeming [...] or is writhing, like in a hive” (2022: 80). Nevertheless, with this statement Nancy is not denying the deprivation of touch during the pandemic either. Indeed, he underlines this double movement of both proliferation and deprivation. Nancy explains that the deprivation of touch has also brought to light what we have been being deprived of. We cannot touch each other, he writes, “which means that we touch this separation all the more and all the better” (2022: 80). The proliferation is there, in what the separation prompts us to re-think, to move, to share, to mobilize, to create. In other words, the deprivation of touch can also generate an abundance of different innovative ways of touching and of thinking about human contact.

Another way to approach this idea could be to suggest that the deprivation of touch generates not just an awareness but also a hunger for touch. This hunger is what urge the proliferation or multiplications of different forms of contact, opening at the same time a path for new perspectives on the issue of touch nowadays. In this sense, I am taking the name from the dance performance *Skin Hunger* (2021) as the title for this writing, precisely because the choreographer Jasmine Ellis and the musician, radio-, and podcast-composer Johnny Spencer aim at rethinking the role of touch in times of the pandemic in a creative and artistic way. They start, indeed, from the idea of the deprivation of physical contact to approach its side effects in different spheres of society, and therefore, this hunger for the skin, this hunger for touch. Through the dance performance the artists explore the repercussions and different experiences regarding the lack of touch during the pandemic, while the dancers experience themselves several forms of proximity and distance. I am approaching the performance more extensively in the second part of this writhing, but it is worth underlining here that *Skin Hunger* can also be seen as one of the proliferations that brings to light what different people have been deprived of, and therefore, how the hunger for the skin, for touch, arises.

Returning to the issue at hand, from a cultural analytical perspective that echoes both Nancy’s concerns and the motivations of *Skin Hunger*, the Cultural Studies researchers Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel (2021) approach this always changing multiplication of (new) forms of contact in the pandemic in a recent publication. They explain this “proliferation” in terms

of a “massive reconfiguration of relationships; with oneself, with other people, with places, with things” (Steiner/Veel 2021: 1). These reconfigurations, the authors argue, are associated with the fact that they are not just part of a temporary state of emergency. A raising awareness of touch as one of the means by which the coronavirus disease is transmitted, generated a significant shift in the way of experiencing the relationship with our environment. A wide range of activities, beginning with the most simple tasks, such as opening a door, or speaking to someone in the street, are still being experienced as potential risks of infection. Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the authors remind us, different policies, regulations, and measures across the globe have aimed at limiting physical proximity, and therefore, also human contact through touch. The pandemic has certainly changed how we experience and perceive touch, especially considering that “even the gentlest and most caring touch can spread the disease” (Steiner/Veel 2021: 1). This situation regarding bodily contact has physical, affective, and emotional effects. Steiner and Veel include feelings of anxiety, solitude, sorrow, numbness, uncertainty, as well as those of compassion, solidarity, or excitement in a list of sometimes contradictory categories through which the pandemic is being experienced (Steiner/Veel 2021: 2). The constant reconfigurations of touching and being touched in times of social distancing, consequently, are understood as a result of a physical and affective crisis that urge us to search for other ways of contact. “Hugs, handshakes, kisses, and physical proximity are all commonplace forms of interaction that are asked to avoid during the pandemic, prompting us to find other ways of touch and being touched by others” (Steiner/Veel 2021: 3). Behind this prompting lies the hunger for the skin, for touch, for contact.

At this point, I would like to address the question about what it means that the commonplace forms of contact have become a risk. I would argue that this hunger for the skin, for touch, and contact is a consequence of a certain shift regarding the limits of touch. On the one hand, it is evident that those commonplace forms of touch are asked to be avoided because they are considered to be ways in which the virus can be transmitted and, therefore, they constitute a risk. But, on the other hand, touch has always had an element of risk, even of threat. It is worth asking, thus, what has specifically shifted since the pandemic started. It seems that what has shifted is related to the issue of the limit of touch, always connected to a certain untouchability, to a certain “do not touch,” to a certain risk contained as a possibility

in every contact. It seems that the limit of touch in connection to this element of risk expanded to new directions. The philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida approach this issue of the limit regarding touch from different but similar positions that can shed interesting light on the present discussions about touch, its limit, and the pandemic. I am going to refer just briefly to each of them to be able to address this idea of a certain expansion of the limits of touch.

Beginning with Jean-Luc Nancy, the author points out that touch has always to do with a limit; it is related to certain conditions, conventions, and to what is permissible concerning the bodies coming into contact (Nancy 2013: 19). This limit is usually crossed through the different forms of caress or violence, like a hug or a punch, and therefore, different forms of proximity could become a source of risk (2013: 19). This has to do with the well-known idea of the taboo of touch. In *No li me tangere*, Nancy (2008: 84) mentions that in the context of any action of touching, the limit is crossed or exposed. But in certain circumstances this transgression can entail certain sort of violence. The warning in the phrase “do not touch me”, which someone could pronounce or express through a gesture, for instance, entails a sort of violence and threat: “do not touch me, do not try to touch me, or I beat you up” (2008: 84).

Jacques Derrida refers to the limit of touch connected with this idea of threat. The author suggests that touch could become a threat when it turns into an excess. He calls this as a “tangible excess” (Derrida 2000: 47). It is associated with an “excessive intensity of touch” that is capable of destroying (2000: 47). It is about, for instance, a concrete physical intensity, capable to exert a dangerous pressure over another body. In other words, it has to do with the possibility of the extermination of another being. This is what Derrida refers to as a “hyperbole”, the hyperbole of the tangible (*L’hyperbole du tangible*) (2000: 47). In this sense, what this excessive intensity or this hyperbolic dimension of touch can destroy is life. This is why touch is related, the author explains, to a measure, a moderation, at the service of life. Unlike the other senses in general, “touching, then is a question of life and death” (Derrida 2000: 47). Before any religion, tabu, or neurosis of touch, Derrida suggests, there is this measure at the beginning, this limit, a vital untouchability; do not touch, not too much.

One could suggest that this element of risk or threat has drastically been transformed during the pandemic. The different forms of touching, including the gentle, intimate, or even minimal touch, have become a risk of infec-

tion and even a death threat too. In this sense, the idea of the “hyperbole” of touch can be useful to explain this shift. What has dramatically shifted is the hyperbole of the tangible. One could suggest that one of the consequences is that touch has become hyperbolic in itself, in a generalized way. In other words, touch became hyperbolic, a death threat, in all its commonplace forms. This is why the limit of touch has expanded up to the minimal touch, which was not a threat before. One could even propose a “hyperbolic era of touch”, characterized by a hyperawareness of touch as a risk when touch becomes a risk in all its ordinary, quotidian, and familiar forms.<sup>1</sup> It is in this context of untouchability, of constant surveillance of touch, of extreme vulnerability and fragility generated by touch, of policies of distance and separation, that the viral proliferations of alternative forms of contact, of sharing, of re-thinking touching and being touched, have come to the forefront of the public thought. And it is in this context of untouchability where the hunger for touch arises, creating proliferations and massive reconfigurations of touch and contact.

Gabriele Klein and Katharina Liebsch refer to this situation of touch in the context of social distancing as a crisis of the touch regime (*Berührungsordnung in der Krise*) linked to a crisis of the body’s regime itself (*Körperordnung in der Krise*) and a subsequent transformation of the interaction’s regime (*Transformation der Interaktionsordnung*). The authors explain that “when bodies are kept at a distance, when touch becomes a threat, and when health-endangering infections become a possible consequence of touch, structures that are of great importance for subjectivity begin to shake” (Klein/Liebsch 2022: 136, my translation). Touch, the authors remind us from an Aristotelian perspective, describes a relationship to the world in which contact and interaction is nothing but essential. The crisis of social distancing is leaving its mark at the heart of this relationship with the world. In this context, Klein and Liebsch highlight the fact that theater and arts in general as “places of touch”, places

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1 In any case, it should be considered that the notion of contagion comes from the Latin *contāgiō* or *contagium*, which means “contact”. And *contagium* is derived from *tangere*, which means “to touch”. In different times of history, touch has been considered one of the means by which a disease is being spread. In this sense, one could speak of different periods in history when society is confronted with an era of hyperbolic touch. For a comparison between the Covid-19 pandemic and other pandemics in history, see De Graaf et al. (2021). See also Danielle Goldman (2021) for a comparison between Covid 19 and the situation with HIV/AIDS in dance in the 1980 and 1990s.

of co-presence and shared experiences, perceptions, and interactions, have drastically been shaken by these multiple crises (Klein/Liebsch 2022: 137-138). In this sense, as a “place of touch”, dance has also been shaken by these crises in a profound manner.

Dance, as an art and a practice that involves corporeality and present interaction, and as an art that has a particular relationship with touch, has been facing, as Danielle Goldman similarly underlines, not just artistic or pragmatic but existential challenges (2021:66). The author gives an example that is worth mentioning here. She approaches different dance practices that were confronted with social distancing in the time of the pandemic, highlighting particularly that of contact improvisation. Given that movements in the context of this practice are generated by means of touch, it poses a dramatic problem during the pandemic. In this regard, the author explains the following:

The intimacy of contact improvisation and other postmodern dance practices in the time of the novel coronavirus has rekindled anxiety regarding the body's permeability and the unpredictability of shared physical practices, especially those that embrace improvisation—the most unpredictable mode of embodied exploration [...]. ‘Both contact’ and ‘improvisation’ seemed untenable given what we knew about Covid transmission. Too ‘risky.’ (Goldman 2021: 68)

What happens to dance when touch, in general, becomes too risky? It is worth remembering that the sense of touch has played a fundamental role in dance throughout its history both in a physical and affective sense, as Gabriele Brandstetter underlines (2013: 3-4). Moreover, in the context of contemporary dance, touch came into focus and began to be approached reflexively as a theme in itself. This has been mentioned and documented by several authors, like Gabriele Brandstetter (2013), Laurence Louppe (2010), and Gerko Egert (2020) among others, especially concerning different reconfigurations of touch and new possibilities of movement. This means that touch has been explored in different dance practices (like contact improvisation), projects, and performances, creating several new forms of movements, interactions, gestures, and relations. Tactile relationships began to be approached in all their intensities, considering what they entail of darkness, sensuality, eroticism, intimacy, resonances, confusions, violence, of tangible and intangible

forms. As Egert (2020) suggests, contemporary dance performances can implicate different forms of quotidian touch as well, in the forms of modulations, intensifications, and dramatizations, in the sense of actualization and differentiation. This means that touch is always transforming itself through dance and transforming dance in its turn. In this sense, Egert suggests, regarding dance, that the “abstract forces of touch – their movements, sensations, affects, their productivity and multiplicity – produce new possibilities, and further movements” (Egert, 2020: 3).

On the one hand, there is no doubt that new concepts, possibilities, and movements regarding touch are now being drastically challenged. If touch is in crisis, dance is in crisis too. The crisis of touch's regime is a crisis faced by dance. But on the other hand, as far as possible, it has also been approached and reinvented in the context of the pandemic, opening further unexpected reconfigurations as alternative forms of sharing dance and generating a critical understanding of social distancing and the deprivation of touch. As the meaning of touch is constantly changing in different directions –as we saw regarding Nancy's “proliferations”, Steiner and Veel's idea of a “massive reconfigurations”, and Klein and Liebsch's “crisis of the touch regime”– touch is also being constantly re-thought and re-embodied in dance during this crisis.

The different ways in which this has impacted dance around the world, generating numerous strategies of sharing, are extremely diverse. In the following, I will concentrate on the dance Performance *Skin Hunger* (2021), in which the theme of touching during the pandemic has become a subject of reflection and creation on its own, especially concerning the lack or deprivation of touch and its implications. I see this performance as one of the proliferations originated by the multiple crises of touch and the shift regarding the limits of touch.

## Skin Hunger

The dancers barely physically touch each other until the end of the performance. Touch comes to presence through the tension of its intermittence. It is a touch that constantly escapes the sight. The dancers move through the space interacting with interviews about touch which were carried out for the performance. They execute different actions, like running, going down to

the ground, stretching on the floor, and rising up again. They also synchronize the movements of the mouth with those of the words that are being said by others in the interviews. They say words and phrases that invoke the lack of touch, the deprivation of touch, the care and the medical touch, words of experience of touch, of investigation, and definition of touch. With these words, the dancers are together in the space, but a sense of loneliness spreads along with the lack of contact. Nevertheless, at one moment, towards the end of the performance, another quality of movement emerges. A certain sort of proximity and intimacy appears. The caress. After a moment of agitation, two dancers are lying on the floor, face down. Her head rests in his hands. She caresses his face while he leans his face on hers. They both caress each other's faces. The skin comes to presence through the sweat of the bodies and faces. The skin is heated and therefore blushed, it is red, it is wet. Touch becomes wet, thermic, slippery. Touch entangles with the fluid of the bodies. An absolutely contagious touch. This scene was particularly suggestive because watching people touch each other in the public sphere has taken on a new meaning and therefore sharpens the gaze regarding touch and being touched. I would suggest that touch acquires a different weight. On the one hand, it acquires the weight of rediscovering and re-experiencing touch as a place of connections and affections. But on the other hand, it acquires the weight of identifying touch as a place of fears and tensions, a place that carries the weight of a hyperbolic touch.

What happens when no one touches? This was one of the leading questions approached in the dance performance *Skin Hunger*, presented (live) in the HochX Theater in Munich, in September 2021. The choreographer Jasmine Ellis and the musician, radio-, and podcast-composer Johnny Spencer explored the repercussions of the lack of touch in society throughout the dance performance. In an interview with the editor and broadcaster Lisa Bögl, Ellis explains that they were not only interested in the absence of touch but in the side effects of touch deprivation as well, and how this is affecting people in different ways.<sup>2</sup> To collect information, they conducted a series of interviews, gathering stories from a variety of persons having different experiences regarding touch in the pandemic. They interviewed, therefore, a wide range of people (nurse, a social worker, scientists and researchers, dif-

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2 See "It's okay to want a hug", interview with Jasmine Ellis/Lisa Bögl in <https://www.m945.de/audio/its-okay-to-wanna-hug/> (Last access: 18.05.2022).

ferent artists, among others) who were going through touch deprivation or were experiencing touch in different forms during the pandemic. The interviews, in podcast format, became one of the key elements of *Skin Hunger*. These allowed the artists not just to think about touch in times of social distancing, but also to consider it as a materiality of the performance as such. In this sense, fragments of the interviews would later be shared on the stage. Four dancers (Breeanne Saxton, David Pallant, Gabriel Lawton, Kim Kohlmann) interact with the sound and meaning of the interviews, creating new forms of sharing this information while exploring different forms of proximity and distancing. The dancers also speak, lip-sync, comment, or convert the texts, generating a complex sound dimension of touch. As Ellis also explains in the interview, one has a radio listening experience in between the scenes.

On the one hand, *Skin Hunger*, as a live dance performance, opens a particular new/old space of sharing during the pandemic. Maintaining social distancing and using masks, a reduced audience was allowed to sit in the same closed space shared with the dancers and artists. And on the other hand, *Skin Hunger* explores and shares with the public diverse experiences, situations, and difficulties that different people are having regarding touch and the deprivation of touch. This sharing takes place while the audience experiences both the separation through the social distancing and the connection with the common and different experiences regarding touch during the diverse times and regulations in the pandemic.

Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, the social distancing policies and the lockdowns, Jasmine Ellis was interested in the experiences of loneliness and isolation. In different of her works, she reflects about the value of interpersonal connections for society. She describes this as a basic need to feel connected or be seen by other people. And she understands that dance, and arts, in general, can have a place in society that facilitates that connection. In *Skin Hunger*, therefore, Ellis returns to this topic considering the lack of physical contact in the pandemic, raising awareness of the implications of touch deprivation. *Skin Hunger*, hunger for physical contact, hunger for the skin of the other, shed new light on the issue of touch, bringing together in the same space the re-embodied voices of different experiences and perceptions regarding touch and the lack of touch during the pandemic.

Finally, I wanted to suggest that the performance *Skin Hunger* addresses this hunger for the skin as a consequence of the shift regarding the expansion of the limits of touch, that is, it responds to the fact that the commonplace

forms of touch have turn into a risk, into a hyperbolic touch. The performance also addresses this proliferation, the crisis of touch, and this multiple reconfiguration of the forms of touch and contact, turning at the same time into a proliferation itself. This means that the intertwining that Ellis, Spencer, and the dancers did between the interviews and movements can be understood as a form of sharing, of sharing dance, of sharing touch in the midst of separation and connection. In this sense, the potential of sharing, in *Skin Hunger*, can also be understood as a form in which we can stay in touch.

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