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# TOUCH-IN(G)-WORLDS

by Alejandro Ponce de León

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

- John 20:25

Let us first consider Caravaggio's *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1602), which serves as the backdrop to this essay. As widely known, the piece offers an interpretation of the biblical passage where Thomas, doubting the resurrection of Jesus, touches the wound in his torso. Thematically speaking, the piece may be considered a minor variation of Caravaggio's early explorations. As the classicist Glenn Most points out (2009), it echoes previous choices such as the problem of credulity (*La Buona Ventura*, 1594) or the paradox of sight (*Narcissus*, 1597)<sup>1</sup>. But, unlike earlier interpretations of this scene, here we find a particularly sophisticated treatment of the practice of doubt, opening up a space to reflect on western regimes of tactility<sup>2</sup>. Through the compositional choices, such as Thomas's unattending eyes or the apostle's bodily tension, Caravaggio violently pulls the viewer's gaze towards the finger's inquisitive gesture. Rather than a divine revelation, the almost clinical scene testifies to a form of certitude acquired through sense experience. In this early-modern composition, we may speculate, tact is revealed as a way of determining the veracity of an idea about the Extension (resurrection) rather than an encounter with the divine.

The story of Thomas is commonly found in discussions about doubt, the body, and the divine. What is *that* which the hand touches as it delves into the unknown? For the past few years, I have been reflecting on this issue as I photograph people's hands. The provocation that I have been following

has to do with how tact, by way of the hand, opens up the world to the human being<sup>3</sup>—especially at times of environmental uncertainty like ours. Acting almost like an archivist, I attend to hands as they explore textures, work, write, or simply wait for *something* to happen. My images focus on the ways hands encounter 'nature' (whatever *that* is) and, like in Caravaggio, on the engagements through which the words of those who came before us are attested. "Don't touch *that!*" "Go and pet that dog." I try to listen to the unexpected stories that hands tell. My photos reveal age, race, or even trauma. They also reflect gentleness, stress, or bad habits.

But the stories that I trace are not necessarily biographical. Instead, I think of my images as ways of *capturing*—in an experimental sense—how bodies engage with, make, and tell their local worlds. Briefly consider the hands of the farmer who prepares the plot of land and turns it into something 'visible' for the engineer. Or those of the landowner who redirects the course of the river and makes it 'possible' for the environmentalist to protect. Now, imagine my hands as they type these words. Think of how this gesture takes you *somewhere*, as if my point-of-view relocated your thinking—a sort of virtual *handshake*. More than in the psychological puzzle, my research-practice opens up hands as sites to explore environmental co-composition. Here, a world is revealed not as something simply to be 'picked up'—as a good modernist would consider—, but as made and making through those who dwell in it.

<sup>1</sup> Glenn W. Most. *Doubting Thomas* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Diane Ackerman. *A Natural History of the Senses*. (Vintage: New York, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> See: Martin Heidegger. *Parmenides*. (Indiana University Press: Indianapolis, 1998), 80–85.





As you follow this thought, it is not difficult to imagine how environmental politics may *actually* begin at our fingertips. This is a compelling idea as we consider the political failures, social detachments, and our crippling incapacity to make ‘sense’ of the ongoing depletion of the environment. To me, this contemporary impasse is related to the inability of certain hands to ‘touch’ –and thus, believe?—the rapid transformations occurring at a yet *unthinkable* pace. Think, once again, about the hands that make decisions regarding global warming, sign transnational treaties, conduct studies or hold cocktails at academic conferences. These are not the same hands that endure the decomposition of local life-worlds across the globe –they might not even feel the dryness in their own backyards. For it to be true, the toxicity that flows from the oil rig and into the river in Ecuador has to be *sensed* by the hands of a technician in Pennsylvania. Ocean acidification in Samoa has to be statistically proven through someone’s keyboard in the Bay Area, made into a *tangible* phenomenon before it becomes a ‘matter’ of concern.

This is not necessarily an issue of us against *them*. The more we look at the motions of our hands, the more we’ll find ourselves as being complicit participants. The problem for me, however, is that few of us are open to being *touched* by our collectively composed tragedies. It might just be a matter of time or a historically specific situation –depends on where you look at it. In the aftermath of the 2017 Texas wildfires, which killed more than

12,000 head of cattle, I heard ranchers complain about the indifference they received from the State. The American People, they said, didn’t lend a *helping hand*. They were *touched*, however, by the quotidian scenes of neighbors helping one another as they reconstructed their fences, their walls. The hands in my images tend to be in solitude, and I read this as a condition of possibility for contemporary hand practices. Ours are hands specialized in particular gestures, particular motions, and specific ways to be human. Hands that, even in worldly makings, have learned to act individually, locally, or in silos.

Let’s return to Thomas. Caravaggio’s interpretation of the story suggests a Thomas who will believe in resurrection through the sense apprehension. Jesus has genuinely accepted his demand and invites him to put his finger in the injury –a revelation previously offered to the other apostles. This proto-modernist reading of the Gospel resonates with what we today call the spirit of scientific skepticism: to touch is to be able to believe in a prior ‘made-ness’ of the world –be it ‘social’ or otherwise. But if we go back to earlier depictions, such as that of Duccio (1308), we may find a different interpretation. In Duccio, we are offered a Thomas whose eyes are locked on Christ as his hand approaches the open wound. Building the tension around the eyes, as windows to the soul, Thomas is embracing not the wound but the yet-unknown divine. The hand recognizes its carnal manifestation, yes. Still, tact

is suggested to be a relation of essences: through the encounter of the eyes, Jesus *becomes* the Christ while he *becomes* a believer.

The world that modern tact opens for us is one that has been already made, *here* or somewhere else, as an issue or right. We may touch it to acknowledge its presence, only if the Law allows trespassing. “Don’t touch *that!*”. But to several non-modern –or more-than-modern— peoples, as anthropologists keep reminding us, the world is not merely an issue to be concealed or revealed. As in Duccio’s Thomas, the world and the Self may exist through infinite gestures of contact and tact. “Go and pet that dog.” In my images, I find those lingering presences that resist the modern fantasy while reminding us that the Earth is not there for us to pick apart, but also changing us – even if we don’t feel it. In the calluses that populate the worker’s hand, the dryness, and scars, a world that is increasingly resisting participation is opened for reflection. Even more, as we are co-think amidst the current pandemic, consider how modern binaries are being blurred as part of your every day: where do you draw the fine line that divides the human from non-human *menace?* –even the President has to wash his hands.

My research-practice, above all, is an invitation to attend with care and responsibility to the unfolding of tact, not as the engagement between differentiated forms, but as the conditions of possibility for the terms in relation –a radically

aesthetic moment. This attending is much more than an intellectual provocation. It is also an ethical and political reflection that aims at the cultivation of new modes of being together, respecting, and holding one another. Contemporary Latin American art, rich in relational practices, is one of the traditions that I am learning from. I am thinking, for example, about the work of the Rafael Villares, which proposes a reflection on the almost invisible filaments that sustain collective life. Similarly, I am drawn to the work of Alexandra Kehayoglou, which invites its audience to dwell in textured, affective, and collective maps of local territories. Or the work of Mariangela Aponte, which proposes different ways of encountering the living forces of the landscape through a methodology she calls ‘hyper-romanticism’ –a creative retracing of our everyday life that connects us back to the forces of Earth.

These are just a few names in an emerging continental conversation on what I would call ‘touching practices,’ which moves us towards different forms of tact. It is not the touch of what is being repeated, but the uncanny touch, a touch that invites us to wonder, that carries us and makes us something else. A touch that, rather than indicating, opens our Self to the forces made and making our worlds. It may be a touch that stays with the always-unknown practical relations that makes us more than one but less than many. Or a touch that reanimates the ever-present forces that moves us as part of a world.



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