

## The Case for Touch

Troy Mock

I absolutely despise the phrase *Do Not Touch*. Whether it is pasted on a dusty sign at the antique store, or spoken from the scowling lips of a mother to her son, its meaning is equally atrocious. Those three words have created a stigma around material touch, whether for purchase or for show. I cringe when I see patrons peruse with their arms clasped behind their backs, seeing but not *feeling*. Observing but not *experiencing*.

I am not an accredited “toucher” or “tactilist,” whichever pronunciation you may prefer. I am not one to brush a hand along the table edge to feel the unique story of the wood grain. But I have always been opportunistic when it comes to touch. I am one to extend a hand along an aisle of linen shirts, feeling for the softest shirt as much as seeing for the freshest. The curiosity of the tactile experience beckons me to explore. What does the sea foam feel like as the wind kneads it like dough into the ocean beach? Do my fingernails feel the way they squeal against a chalkboard? How can I describe the satisfaction of balancing a well designed fork in my hand?

Psychoanalysts have explored the nurturing power of human touch since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Physical touch is proven to positively regulate emotion in both children and adults. A whole-hearted hug can be a conduit of comfort, promoting the physical to something more. I can speak from experience— a friend of mine gives the most endearing hugs, and for a second or two, my worries burst under the force of her snuggled face against my collarbone. While the power of human touch is revered, why is the touch of objects not? Touch is perhaps the most universal and immediate of the five senses. There is little cognitive assessment when you spill scalding tea on yourself— the pain is as immediate as it is sharp. On the other end of the spectrum, the soft pelt of a Golden Retriever cuddles the tactile sense of anyone, dog lover or not.

I haven’t made it through my tactile journey unscathed. My parents inform me of the time many years ago when I attempted to eat a plastic cookie at a cookware store. I burst into tears when its texture did not match the crumbly crunch of a real cookie. While I’ve purged that trauma from my memory, I do remember the violent jolt when I accidentally wired two ends of a battery together. Or the time I was perusing the fragrance aisle of a convenience store and managed to spray perfume directly in my eye. That stinging experience has conditioned me to keep my distance from spray nozzles (I’ve more recently realized jalapeño and itchy eyes make for a potent combo).

The boundaries of touch are not limitless. My tactile impulse halts where the white walls of a museum begin. No matter how much I want to feel the swirls of *The Starry Night* or the smooth marble of Picasso’s *Bust of a Woman*, I refrain primarily out of respect, and partly to avoid ridicule from the museum guards’ stern eyes and primed mouth. I can appreciate the artist’s mastery from afar. One time at the MOMA, I caught sight of a neat stack of paper photography posters in the middle of a gallery. Wary of touching part of the exhibit, I kept my hands in my pockets. It wasn’t until a brave (or undiscerning) patron took a free poster that I reached for my own.

I am constantly reevaluating my limits of touch, swaying across either side of societal boundaries. If there is one thing I’ve learned, complacency kills in the quest for understanding. As the snow swirls in the November sky by the ambition of the gentle wind, I urge you to chart the

path of a single snowflake on the palm of your hand. Watch it loft onto a fresh layer of powder. Don't hesitate to place your bare hand on this smooth blanket— let the frigid powder succumb under the pressure of your palm. The experience might not be warm. But it sure is real.