Chapter Ten

BOTH WAYS: GROWING ART AND COMMUNITY THROUGH TOUCH

KRISTIN TOLLEFSON

> "(S)ometimes the transactions between small and large multiply, have repercussions."[1]

HUMANS DEPEND ON touch. Growing research demonstrates its beneficial effects: skin-to-skin contact has been shown to accelerate growth in premature infants, and hand massage reduces the stress-induced cortisol in those with dementia. Touch given and received with care and kindness has the capacity to stimulate brain receptors that activate the lymphatic system, which boosts the body's natural defenses, augments well-being, and increases the capacity for compassion.[2] An arm around the shoulder from a friend or a hug from a loved one communicates without words an array of affirmations including safety, connection, trust, and collaboration.

At the end of 2020, our radically physically distanced world was starved for contact. The global pandemic's enduring mandate to remain physically distant was compounded by the darkest days of the year. Concerns about the impact of touch deprivation had been voiced within a month of orders to shelter in place. And yet, nearly ten months later, many around the world were still living apart, aware of the growing contradiction of forced separation imposed by a global public health crisis and the fundamental need for physical contact.

Some of the most palpably affected by absence of touch were seniors living alone or in assisted living facilities. Formerly connected to vibrant lives through social groups and the circulation of family and friends, these actively engaged bodies and minds were ordered to quarantine, with in-person human interaction mediated by masks, gloves, and plastic sheeting. Conditions that already posed risks for this age group, including

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 169.

2 Dacher Keltner, "Hands On Research: The Science of Touch," *Greater Good Magazine*, September 10, 2010, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/hands_on_research.

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depression, anxiety, irritability, and dementia saw a dramatic uptick during this time. The worst situations saw rapid deterioration of physical health or even death, the cause of which was attributed to "a failure to thrive."[3] These factors illustrated with painful clarity the interrelationship of mental health, social-emotional health, and physical health and the way the body engages with the world.

That touch and its life-giving power would be at the centre of a conversation unfolding within an art museum points to other kinds of conflict and change. Throughout history—and significantly over the past 150 years—museums have been institutions designed to separate and classify both contents and visitors. Hierarchies of carefully maintained power that serve to elevate a select few to the exclusion of all others had cultivated a system that placed an outsized emphasis on the visual, and all but dismissed the other senses.

> [T]he hope of many museologists was that the museum would have a civilizing and educational effect on the general public. For this to happen, however, visitors could no longer be permitted to run around and grab everything—they must learn to control their bodies as they enlightened their minds. The formation of the modern state required that visitors to a public museum be both awed by the splendor of this emblematic state institution and impressed with a sense of its inviolability. The perceived importance of fostering respect toward the cultural and political authority museum pieces were understood to represent was a major factor in the exclusion of touch from the museum in the mid-nineteenth century.[4]

Today, many museums are consciously dismantling and unlearning institutional power structures such as these. Significant shifts in understanding about the role of the body in relation to accessibility to art has opened diverse sensory pathways for learning, including touch. New museums have embraced the opportunity and responsibility to invent themselves and fold these forms of engagement into their evolution. This has been true of the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art (BIMA), where I inhabit a multifaceted role as Director of Education and DEI Advancement and artist. BIMA is a regional art museum in the Puget Sound region of Washington State that features contemporary art and craft, including artists books, metal, wood, jewellery, and other forms. From its inception, every aspect of the museum —artists, architecture, audience, and more—was considered with a reverence for engagement, touch, the maker's hand, and tactile experience at its heart. BIMA's inclusive mission extends this approach beyond the physical to the conceptual, inspiring "curiosity, wonder and understanding" by connecting people and art in ways that are inextricable from the sensory world.

Participatory engagement of the whole person in the museum is an invitation that extends throughout our exhibits and programs, and grounds the ideology of the muse-

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3 Emily Paulin, "Is Extended Isolation Killing Older Adults in Long-Term Care? Five Months of COVID-19 Lockdowns Have Created a Mental Health Crisis," AARP Web site, September 3, 2020, https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/health/info-2020/covid-isolation-killing-nursing-home-residents.html.

4 Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*, Studies in Sensory History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 177. Kindle.

um's education department. We strive to create opportunities to observe, share stories about, and make art in all spaces in the museum—activating the galleries, auditorium, and classroom—and beyond, through collaborations and outreach opportunities. Over the years, the department had grown from a single person to three: a dedicated School and Families Program Manager who oversaw our robust youth-focused initiatives, and a new Creative Associate role that would be supported by the addition of an AmeriCorps member to our education team.

Although our work with all ages had always been guided by a conviction that engagement brings transformation, data specifically indicated that social engagement was a fundamental need for seniors in our region (Kitsap County). Initial collaborations with Mary Jane Knecht and the Creative Aging programs at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington engaged people with early-stage memory loss and their care partners in conversation, questions, recollections, and personal anecdotes prompted by curated film clips around a theme. We began hosting a facilitated "Mindfulness Meditation" series and launched "Look Again," a monthly, guided, gallery-based looking and talking series aimed at providing people with memory loss and their care partners a space to convene around art, conversation, and community at the art museum. Walking in the gallery, the candid questions and curiosity unfiltered by formality were as galvanizing as the conversation over coffee and pastries that followed. Friendships were forged over shared experiences with dementia, and the candor, humour, and care that infused these connections grew relationships that extended far beyond the museum.

Establishing the Creative Aging Associate as the lead for this collective of programs would promote existing connections with organizations such as the senior centre arts and culture lectures and the senior-focused Island Volunteer Caregivers (IVC), increase our capacity for outreach to assisted living facilities and other county-wide resources, and spearhead further innovation. Our commitment was firmly in place to foster "positive aging": efforts to "'replace the ageist cultural narrative … with one that recognizes age as a season of learning, creativity and vitality,' … [correlating] positive thinking with wellness and longevity. It emphasizes the importance of being active and finding joy in life."[5]

In March 2020, we were a month away from launching an exciting pilot that would support this very approach: a workshop series taught by and for seniors. Hiring experienced teaching artists from the senior community would provide opportunities for student interaction and the potential for additional income. Providing quality art materials and the setting of our light-filled classroom and galleries were also key, components that underscored our commitment to offering generously of the museum's time, resources, and care. Co-creating the offerings with those who would participate ensured that we remained relevant and representative of the community we were working with, another aspect of empowering this historically underrepresented group. Our intentions and actions revealed transformative ways of thinking about and living what a museum does, and who is invited to participate. Even as the museum closed to the public that month

5 Marjorie Schwarzer, *Museums and Creative Aging: A Healthful Partnership* (Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2021), 9.

Figure 10.1. Wire garland crocheted by author as "growing line" for exhibition of "Both Ways" project. Photograph courtesy of author. See in colour at https://www.instagram.com/bothwaysproject/.

and we sheltered in place, the essence of this potential for authentic work with our senior population remained. How could we continue to espouse the qualities we were living into, these eloquent guiding principles of community engagement: giving ownership and holding space, creating opportunities, and providing resources and tools?[6]

Stepping into radical engagement with community energized me and infused my thoughts in the months during which we shifted our museum education programming to originate from and be received by people at home. As we quickly adapted our in-person, all-ages in-gallery art-making program "Art in Action," to a series of homemade videos, we kept equity at the forefront of our minds. What activities might be accessible to new art learners? What materials might be available to people in isolation? How could we bridge the gap in human connection created by being physically remote by helping participants build kinesthetic skills? The videos were reaching a range of audiences in new ways, taken from their home on the museum's YouTube Channel and packaged as part of a local television program geared toward seniors, called AgeWise (Seattle Channel). We began to consider what other ways we could open up access to the arts, including the potential for distributing supply kits that would promote the hands-on experience of making.

Similar questions began to surface in my thinking outside the museum, with regard to my independent practice as a maker. Prior to the pandemic, I had been invited to show an installation of my work at METHOD Gallery in Seattle, which had been rescheduled for January 2021. Creating a physical exhibit unlikely to be widely seen in person was poignant. I struggled with how to reframe my original proposal, which expanded upon crocheted and beaded wire elements begun during an artist residency the year before. Isolation had me wondering whether what I originally wanted to say with this

6 Lauren Benetua, Nina Simon, and Stacey Marie Garcia, *Community Issue Exhibition Toolkit* (Santa Cruz: Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 2018), 29. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8e0a68f9a61e43fb3eb0e2/t/5d0d7ca1321ce60001d7f4a5/1561164964894/Community-Issue-Exhibition-Toolkit-FINAL.pdf.

work was worth moving beyond the idea stage. Social justice, systemic racism, and critical conversations around equity in the arts were the conversations I was steeped in now. I stepped back to listen and learn.

Over the ensuing months, I embraced an alternative approach, one that brought me closer to the fundamentals of engagement that had sparked me in the museum context. I would use the gallery opportunity to expose and unify threads that ran through all of my creative work, both in and out of the studio. I forced myself to question my story and demanded that I work harder to articulate my truth. "Some of the most pervasive and least examined aspects of craft are its sensuous qualities, especially its appeal to touch," posits David Howes in *The Craft of the Senses*.[7] Craft, making, and labour had always been central to my work, as had the tensions between the hand and the mind and the ways that these forces narrate our lived experiences with the creative gesture. My practice embraced a range—from jewellery to studio sculpture and public art commissions, and even education and activism—and through it all, I was leaving evidence of and creating opportunities for the sensory to coexist with the conceptual. How could this installation reveal the interdependence of care and making, of mental and physical, and help shape a new and integrated way of thinking about my art practice, all within the context of this installation?

It was during a virtual studio visit with artist-gallerists Paula Stokes, Paul D. McKee, and Mary Coss that the answer to this question further crystalized. Throughout our conversation, we wondered together how art and this installation might viscerally engage with and for people. Could it honour or invite touch even with the overarching constraint of distance? I mentioned the feeling of growing urgency around isolated seniors and the ways the museum was approaching a solution. Paula, a glass artist, Paul, a multimedia artist skilled in fabrication techniques, and Mary, a sculptor who had been developing an interactive project with a retirement community, enthusiastically advocated for braiding these ideas together. What if the most powerful version of this exhibition opportunity was an accumulation of parts: a community art project centred in the handmade object, an exercise in rekindling experiences of touch with people for whom lack of physical contact was a public health issue, a collaboration that made a shared space for artists, educators, social service organization, museum, and gallery, art that could not exist without the hand but also existed virtually?

Focusing the project on bringing the sensuous qualities of materials and process to artists who were most in need of touch as a form of community-based engagement coalesced the idea into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

> Interpersonal touch allows us to think through our hands, to communicate and interpret emotion by the feeling of skin on skin. Craftwork is also a form of manual thinking. As we craft, we use our hands to express ourselves, to make decisions, and to problem-solve … Like social touch, handicraft reduces stress and, ultimately, brings us a type of sensual

7 David Howes, "The Craft of the Senses," April 2, 2011 (occasional paper, *Centre for Sensory Studies*, Concordia University, Canada), https://centreforsensorystudies.org /occasional-papers/the-craft-of-the-senses/.

> pleasure. Instead of the gratification of a loving caress or a friendly pat on the back, it's the delight of [the material]… .[8]

And so the seeds were planted for the radical inclusion of *Both Ways*, a title borrowed from poet A. R. Ammons.[9] I began the intensive process of hand crocheting a wire garland adorned with metal leaves and beads (Fig. 10.1). The growing line would suggest otherworldly botany along with familiar qualities of jewellery and children's games. Its size and shape were key: at 91 feet long (27 m) and 8 inches (20 cm) wide, it would be massive enough to serpentine through the gallery, occupying space and encouraging physical interaction. My partner, sculptor Dan Webb, built a zig-zagging custom, wooden trestle system that elevated the garland 30 inches (75 cm) off the floor in the gallery, jutted up the wall, and followed the sill of windows so the work could be experienced from outside the gallery at all hours.

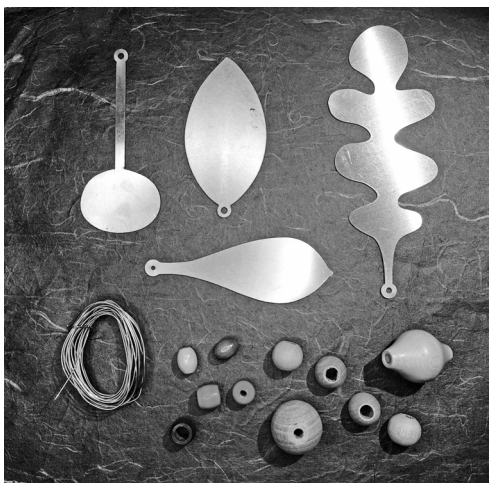

Figure 10.2. Component pieces of art kits distributed to community artists for "Both Ways" project. Photograph courtesy of author. See in colour at https://www.instagram.com/bothwaysproject/.

Concurrently, Anika Tabachnick, who had stepped into the role of BIMA's AmeriCorps Program Associate in the midst of the pandemic, was in their third month of service. As a way to connect home-bound seniors with art making supplies, they had advocated for the creation and distribution of art kits in collaboration with Island Volunteer Caregivers (IVC). When I received an individual artist's grant from the local arts and humanities council, the funds went toward the purchase of more of the wood beads, wire, and metal leaves that had been used in the garland construction. These sensuous, tactile materials would be packaged as elements of our first round of art kits, along with a guide that introduced the vision for *Both Ways* and asked for the seniors' involvement. (See Fig. 10.2.)

The guide invited participating artists to use the provided parts creatively and welcomed them to incorporate additional materials of their own. Artists were also encouraged to email photos of themselves with their creations (for publication on a dedicated

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8 Ainsley Hawthorn, "Is Craft Booming in COVID Because We're Starved for Touch?" *Psychology Today* (blog), May 23, 2020, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-sensory-revolution/202005/is-craft-booming-in-covid-because-were-starved-touch.

9 A. R. Ammons, "Coming Right Up," in *The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 135.

Figure 10.3. "Selfie" taken with creation by Hannah J., one of the community artists for "Both Ways" project. Photograph courtesy of author and artist. See in colour at https://www.instagram.com/bothwaysproject/.

Instagram feed and for inclusion in a looped slide show on a video monitor in the gallery) and to share back their finished work as an addition to the larger installation in the gallery. As an offering of exchange for their creative labour, they were given the opportunity to hold on to a selection of the kit components for their own use, and they would be kept informed of the project as it unfolded. Anika coordinated the distribution of over thirty-five kits of parts to participating artists in assisted living facilities and living on their own with the support of Lynn Murphy, IVC's Life Enrichment Coordinator, and a team of IVC volunteers.

A few weeks later, finished pieces began to appear. Emailed photos arrived first, many featuring masked artists with their work and others focusing on the work itself. A garland assembled out of synthetic flowers was laced intermittently with dark wood beads and subtle glints of metal. One artist held her creations triumphantly in outstretched hands. Another was pictured lying on the floor, her smiling face tucked close to the bloom she had fashioned out of repurposed plastic food containers, pen caps, beads, and metal leaves (Fig. 10.3). A third posed formally with a tree branch adorned with fabric and printed paper text adhered to the leaves. An oyster shell garnished with beads inside and a clever safety pin clasp adhered to the back was rendered both tactile and wearable.

A deeper layer of the project was revealed when the physical objects were collected from the artists. Each piece was as spectacularly unique as the individuals who made them. I was struck by the visceral and unexpected choices of materials, marks, and methods. My internalized understanding of what it means to be an artist and who gets to make art were challenged by the representations of willingness and abandon brought to this collective action. The objects portrayed inarguable evidence of this delight, and this group of dynamic co-conspirators demonstrated what a radical gesture the hand could make. It was a pure example of "making special," a proposal offered by Ellen Dissanayake that suggests there is a uniquely human impulse toward qualities and behaviors that unite us creatively across cultures.

> [Making special] explains how a concept of art can comprise such variety, even contradiction. Art may be rare and restricted, as modernists believed, or liberating and problematizing, as postmodernists argue. It may be well or poorly done; it may be an individual original creation or a manifestation of a codified historical or regional tradition. It may require talent and long specialized training or be something everyone does naturally much as they learn to swim or cook or hunt. It may be used for anything, and anything can become an occasion for art. It may or may not be beautiful; although making special often results in "making beautiful," specialness also may consist of strangeness, outrageousness, or extravagance. As making special is protean and illimitable, so is art … Making special emphasizes the idea that the arts … have been physically, sensuously, and emotionally satisfying and pleasurable to humans.[10]

Seeing the work created by these artists who joined in *Both Ways* was like taking part in a conversation that lived outside of the appearance of a conversation, but still retained all of the qualities, including a democratic space for engagement: "in which people enter a world of creative speculation and together construct the conversation, reflecting on their own lives as well on the works of art they consider … Conversation seeks equilibrium and inclusiveness … everyone is encouraged, but not required, to participate. Everyone's questions, opinions, and ideas are respected. Everyone listens as well as speaks."[11]

Elevating the many facets of this conversation, the following are the words of some involved.

Hannah Stratton-Jones, *Artist*

> The most meaningful aspect of the project was having tactile objects for designing…to move around & even 'ask' them where they could fit in … it gets very personal between actual objects & myself. I definitely experienced a rediscovery of previous work … delightful, especially while processing the tactile qualities and engaging the role of the 'senses.'
>
> Although the connecting with community happened on a small scale, it was satisfying. The IVC people were very enthusiastic & cheered.
>
> With regard to our arty efforts, not much community was available during COVID lock-down, and you also were very motivating & helpful.
>
> I studied Art Education for five years at the University of Oregon (early 1960s) … no degree due to a severe illness. I have spent the following decades seeking better health and raising two children, so it was lovely to dip into the art process realm again. I truly enjoyed it.

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10 Ellen Dissanayake, "The Core of Art: Making Special," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2003), 26, https://neilgreenberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Dissanayake-on-Art-16856-16986-1-PB.pdf.

11 Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, "Conversation, Discussion, and Dialogue," in *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*, ed. Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2011), 81.

Note: Hannah and I connected personally through this project over people we have in common. Hannah discovered and made mention of the fact that her daughter and I were classmates in high school. The spark of this mutuality made me feel connected beyond my own isolation.

Anika Tabachnick, *AmeriCorps Creative Aging Associate, Bainbridge Island Museum of Art*

> [T]he diversity of interpretations and artworks made by participants presented with the same materials … [and the] collective installation was such a poignant culmination of this project … [S]eeing these objects that have so obviously been caringly crafted come together into a tangible expression and documentation of that physical interaction between hand, wire, and wood was deeply meaningful.
>
> Personally, I am attracted to artwork where the tactile nature of the materials used, and relationship between body and material is abundantly present. I find artwork, and particularly collective or community installations that allow for this documentation of individual interactions and interpretations of collective themes and materials incredibly inspiring. Taking part in *Both Ways* supported my creative and community building practices … facilitating moments of personal connection and supporting opportunities for those I work with to access some of the experiences they may have lacked during the height of the pandemic.
>
> … I would have liked to have the opportunity to learn more about the individuals involved. How did they connect to the project? What did they learn through their creative engagement with the materials? I would have liked to deepen this connection, and I think that in how this project was used as a jumping off point for current programs emerging from BIMA's education department, it has built into deeper community engagement and longstanding relationships.

Lynn Murphy, *Life Enrichment Coordinator, Island Volunteer Caregivers*

> One of the strongest aspects of this project was the diversion it created, a bright light, something different to focus on. And what arose out of it was an opening for a sense of fun. The materials themselves were uplifting, the sensory pleasure of touching the smooth wood beads and the cut metal leaf elements. The dexterity required was attainable for most and there were many who took the project to much more personal places.
>
> Some of the participating artists are "creatives" who jumped right into the project while others expressed initial trepidation, but even the ones who just strung the beads on the wire benefitted. There was lovely sensory learning, and the piece of the community engagement that was so successful was this feeling of participating in something larger than they were, something that reached outside of their constrained living circumstances toward something that felt as if they were making a difference. I've witnessed creativity as such a powerful force … it also stimulates cognitive abilities, and in this way gives back far beyond the completion of the project.

We've been happiest when we've been able to be in person at the museum, and this project reminded us that there is something to look forward to, a time when we'll be able to be together in a group, with art. It would be great to bring art and the social element together in as many places as possible for our participants, who have benefitted in very specific ways.

Paula Stokes, *Artist and Co-Founder, METHOD Gallery*

[The most meaningful part of the project] for me was how Kristin transformed her initial proposal into an act of creativity that included the work of others. Together with the Island Volunteer Caregivers, she bridged obstacles of social distancing to bring her art kits to folks who were very isolated. Through inclusion she offered hope and light.

My work in hot glass nearly always includes at least one set of another's hands to make it. I identified strongly with this work [and the collaborative element] as my most recent project necessitated the work of many individuals. In my native language of Irish there is an expression which I think sums up Kristin's *Both Ways* project, not just through the practical act of making each section, but through the physical manifestation as an intertwining garland[:] "NÍ NEART GO CUR LE CHÉILE—THERE'S NO STRENGTH WITHOUT UNITY."

The tactile process made an impression. Though each section had the same basic materials, each one was like a unique fingerprint of its maker. I am a strong believer in community engagement and participation in art. When people are connected to something bigger than themselves there is a sense of pride and ownership in the work. *Both Ways* was a beacon of light in the dark of winter and in the midst of a time of great global, national, and local anxiety. I hope that it continues to grow and evolve, and [I] look forward to seeing it in a different context other than a gallery setting. I would love to see it outside somewhere.

Sheila Hughes, *Executive Director, Bainbridge Island Museum of Art*

Seeing the *Both Ways* project blossom from concept to execution provided a little piece of beauty in the middle of a very difficult year, and really broke open the ways in which we could imagine the Museum as a new kind of catalyst for community connection. It instantly deepened our sense of partnership with a key senior service agency but more than that, it connected us directly in art, life, and conversation to the clients themselves. Seeing the extraordinary forms that were created by a simple take-home art kit was stunning—they were alternately elaborate, artistic, detailed, personal, absurd, and intentional. The hand of the maker and the dreamer was so apparent. The pandemic was a double-edged condition—it both brought extraordinary poignance and relevance to the isolation that some individuals were experiencing but also forced a realization from us that for many, isolation is a constant state …

Figure 10.4. Detail of "Both Ways" project installation. Photograph courtesy of author. See in colour at https://www.instagram.com/bothwaysproject/.

The conversation continued as the garland, adorned with hundreds of leaves and wooden beads, became entwined with contributions of the inspired collaborators, each piece touched with care and handled again. (See Fig. 10.4.) It continued to resonate, inspiring me to design and fabricate jewellery pieces to weave into the work after it had been installed in the gallery, energized by the unbridled exuberance of the community of artists involved, underscoring the exchange inherent in conversation. The project continues to have consequential and lasting reverberations: one artist found renewed hope to live as a result of their intentional connection to a community outside of themselves. It is staggering to consider the simple origin of such power in a handwork exercise and a group of isolated individuals.

In the end, the lessons learned through *Both Ways* are simple and transferable. Start where you are. Embrace creativity and give generously of time, materials, and care. Use the assets of organization(s) to support individual(s) in thoughtfully considered physical and virtual spaces. Elevate the cognitive, physical, and aesthetic value of touching and making special. Continue the conversation. With persistence and creativity, touch helps create an enduring environment that embraces the many intersections between joy and challenge.

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