

# *Touch*



ARTDES 499: Integrative Project

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## INTRODUCTION

With “Touch”, I created custom pairs of gloves to illustrate and shed light on queer intimacy. What inspired me to create this project was understanding how important intimacy is to me and realizing that we as people are predominately exposed to heterosexual stories of intimacy throughout media and life. I want to create a change, albeit small, in sharing and making space for our stories. “Touch” will present the culmination of interviews with queer people on their stories of intimacy, with them wearing and being photographed in the created pieces, along with their responses to a set of questions displayed in the final exhibition. Through this, I aim to showcase the beauty and difference of queer intimacy, and to make people more aware that the overarching view of intimacy is often viewed from a heteronormative lens.

I started to realize that most of the media that I consumed about love and intimacy came from straight, cis people, written by straight directors, etc. Even sex education or the preliminary guidelines on how one is supposed to deal with genitalia and the rampage of hormones never touched on anything remotely queer. So far, navigating relationships and closeness as a gay man who at one point thought they were a trans woman, has been a journey that I’ve felt very alone in. Of course, this isn’t statistically true, given the rise of social media and the internet, it’s easier than ever to find narratives or people who could act as some type of guideline for your own path if you know where to look. Even then it’s fleeting, an Instagram story about a failed tinder date, a tweet about failing to pass and being clocked, they’re all just wisps to try and grab onto. What I long for is something more long form, something substantial, thus entering “Touch”. I couldn’t help but think so many other queer people have felt that we never really see enough representations of ourselves growing up, let alone representations of how to love or to be intimate with other queer people.

In the following section, I aim to look at how intimacy and love have been set up to be a heterosexual by default, and why a new, queer paradigm or model for intimacy is of the utmost importance. Then I dive into artists that have expressed their desires, rage, love, and intimacy with the fullest extent on the canvas or otherwise. I also go into how the sharing of stories of a variety of narratives is a method to create solidarity within a group of people, and how recognizing yourself in others in one of the most powerful forms of empathy there is.

## CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

### 1. Hegemonic (Heterosexual) Intimacy vs. Queer Intimacy

A large part of me starting this project was realizing that over the course of my lifetime I had ingested stories predominately about hegemonic, heterosexual, intimacy and love. Queer relationships challenge this norm by just existing. “The normative standard that evolved over the course of human history across cultures has been the ideal of two individuals of different binary cisgender identities, namely male and female”<sup>1</sup>. This isn’t to say that heterosexual and queer relationships don’t differ *meaningfully* than heterosexual, normative ones<sup>2</sup>, but that what goes into creating intimacy between queer people and creating a relationship despite norms is very different. In “Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity.” the authors argue for the creation of a “queer paradigm” or a new model for looking at intimacy through a well-researched and studied queer lens. “A queer paradigm better captures the diversity, fluidity, and possibility of human intimacy than the normative paradigm that has historically guided relationship science.”<sup>3</sup> Intimacy, closeness with another human being, can be experienced by individuals of any sexual orientation or gender identity, yet mainstream media, documentation, research, etc. are all behind on this. Creating space and gathering stories of queer intimacy becomes all the more important considering the great lack we currently have.

### 2. Queering Intimacy & The Need for More Narratives

For decades, research has pointed to a gendered experience of intimacy in heterosexual relationships, in fact, most research on intimacy and relationships up until recently have focused exclusively on heterosexual relationships. In “Intimacy and Emotion Work in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Relationships.” Umberson discusses what the “queering” of intimacy means. Queering intimacy means challenging heteronormative gendered views of intimacy (e.g., women want intimacy, men resist intimacy, and partners have different beliefs about the meanings and experiences of intimacy).<sup>4</sup> These ideas can be found echoing throughout popular culture, magazines at grocery line checkouts, what have you, but there's an omnipresent version of what we know intimacy to be, and it's heteronormative.

After digesting this it became clear to me for my project to touch on multiple types of intimacy perspectives from queer people. This work solidified for me that I should focus solely on queer stories of intimacy. Originally, I was inclined to include multiple perspectives from cis and straight girls as well as men, but I no longer feel as inclined to do so. So much of mainstream knowledge of intimacy, sex, and

<sup>1</sup> Hammack, Phillip L., David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes. 2018. “Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity.”

<sup>2</sup> Hammack, Phillip L., David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes. 2018. “Queer Intimacies”

<sup>3</sup> Hammack, Phillip L., David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes. 2018. “Queer Intimacies”

<sup>4</sup> Umberson, Debra, et al. “Intimacy and Emotion Work in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Relationships.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2015, pp. 542–556

relationships stem from heterosexual couples, and the world doesn't need more art affirming what is already on the table. Through my work I want to affirm queer intimacy, and share it publicly, make it known that it exists, and that while having similarities, it is different than the hetero norm. These stories have always existed, but they're now being brought to light

### 3. Sex and Intimacy

Is intimacy inherently associated with sex? This question ran through my head at several points in the beginning of my project. The short answer? No, you can most certainly have intimacy in situations that aren't sexual. This also brought up another notion for me to consider- queer relationships and intimacy, queer people at large are often overtly sexualized in addition to being othered by mainstream society. In doing this queer people are reduced to what kind of sex they have versus what kind of intimacy they have with another; my project aims to focus on the latter. "I'd Much Rather Have Sexual Intimacy as Opposed to Sex" analyzes and interviews gay men on their experiences with sex, relationships, and monogamy. While reading one can connect similar experiences with disillusionment through dating apps and feeling of loneliness. However, physical expressions and relationship wants, and needs vary greatly from person to person.

I noticed an undercurrent of craving intimacy from the men in this piece, but sometimes they didn't use the exact word, or maybe it wasn't in their immediate vocabulary of what they think they want. I want my project to help people use the word "intimacy" more, to feel comfortable with wanting it, and creating their own definition of it. This source shifted my thinking in placing an emphasis on multiple people's experiences and corroborated the idea for the interviews including people aside from myself. Understanding that my audience will have a multitude of identities, it means that I will have to try harder and work to be more inclusive of multitudes of queer identities, to give them a voice when so often they're ignored.

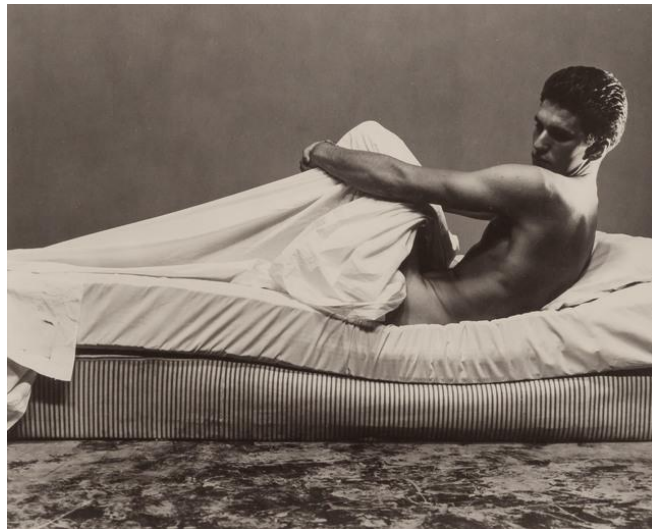


Figure 1 "Male nude in bed," 1955, George Platt Lynes. Source: Doyle

## ARTISTIC CONTEXT

Now that we have a working definition and a bit of history on intimacy, and why intimacy needs to be “queered”- how does one do that as an artist? I used this question as my guiding light when researching artists that touched on what I was starting to unearth. Intimacy is inherently vulnerable, as well as struggles with gender and identity, especially when sharing the experience of it with wider audiences. It only made sense to me to start with taking a deep dive into the work of Tracey Emin.

“Tracey Emin: Life Made Art, Art Made from Life”, by Miguel Medina published through the University of Málaga, analyzes the work, life, and impact of the widely known British artist Tracey Emin. Through Medina's lens of looking at Emin's multimedia work, one can see a relationship with creating and healing for the artist.

The main idea of this piece is getting to the core of what Emin does, which at the end is a personal, and very raw diary of her emotions and experiences being a human, and a woman on this earth. Tracey Emin's Work is heavy disclosure, using the span of her time on this earth for works ranging from painting, drawing, video and installation, to photography, needlework and sculpture. She exposes her fears, traumas (sexual and other), as well as huge failures.

Learning about Emin's own vulnerability has helped to empower me to share my own struggles with gender, not only creating intimacy between my story and a greater audience, but creating sympathy and understanding the variety of queer experience, to the extent that I and the others contributing to this project have experienced it in our lives thus far.

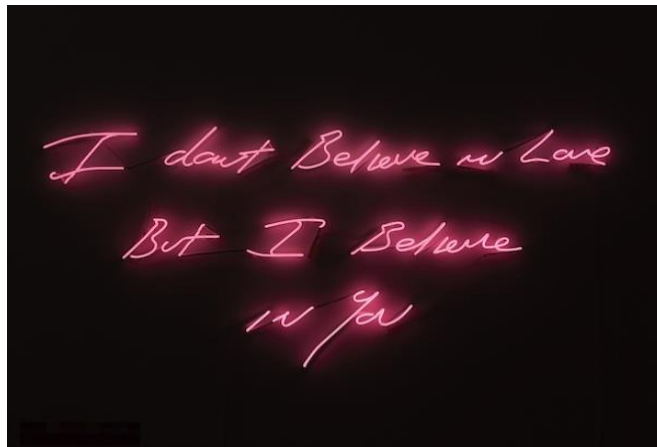


Figure 2 "I Don't Believe in Love but I Believe in You" 2012, Tracey Emin. Source: ArtForum

1. However, one has to be thoughtful & careful when presenting stories that aren't their own to a greater audience, especially when these stories belong to those often ignored.
  - i. Nan Goldin's work, specifically her work documenting the LGBTQ community she was friends with highlights this care in representing someone's narrative

When I started to take into account that I needed other people to contribute to my project, I began thinking about the ethics involved in gathering these stories and thoughts from queer people, who have historically been taken advantage of. While I believed in myself to be thoughtful and caring when it came to include other people in an exhibition that would ultimately be displayed to the public, I wanted a precedent. Enter Nan Goldin & Catherine Opie.

Much of Goldin's earlier work focused on queerness, they were the people she hung out with, her own roommates were gay men doing drag. While capturing these people there is a great amount of intimacy and care that goes into her portraits and pictures. Though she was hugely inspired by Diane Arbus – another seminal photographer capturing the lives of people living on the peripheries – she was troubled by the coldness in Arbus's work. "They always said she waited until they looked crazy to take their picture." Upon reading this work I realized that I needed to go about collecting the stories of queer people with great care and kindness, making sure that I'm not taking anything without permission, or broadcasting a person's thought that they're uncomfortable with. Goldin's sentiments have imparted on me to keep very high ethics and great care when working with others very personal stories.



*Figure 3 Ivy wearing a fall, 1973, Nan Goldin.  
Source: Guggenheim*

2. Expressing queerness through combined media and stories can showcase differences and bring more visibility to the community at large.
  - i. Artists such as Heather Glazzard have put queer subjects at the focus of her work, combining writing and images to create a powerful story that other people can also grow from

Stories of queer intimacy are at the core of my project, so inherently is the notion of sharing. Sharing ideas and thoughts can be an incredibly powerful way to create change, weather that's changing someone's thought process or influencing them to go about their lives differently, perhaps more mindfully. Heather Glazzard is an artist doing this, and helping queer people to share their own stories, propelling the visibility of queer people further.

Heather Glazzard's ongoing project, *Queer Letters*, conducts conversations between queer people and their younger selves via portraits accompanied by hand-written letters, giving the subjects of Heather's images the autonomy of representation and ownership of identity that young queer people are often denied.<sup>5</sup> The artist started the project out of seeing a complete lack of representation, and wanting to create a reliable space of visual representation for the lack of identities they saw in the media growing up. "I realized that the project was about visibility".<sup>6</sup> Heather's work has validated my own, although what we're doing might be similar, mine is very different, with the intermediary between the stories and myself being the custom made gloves, and the focus on intimacy and love.

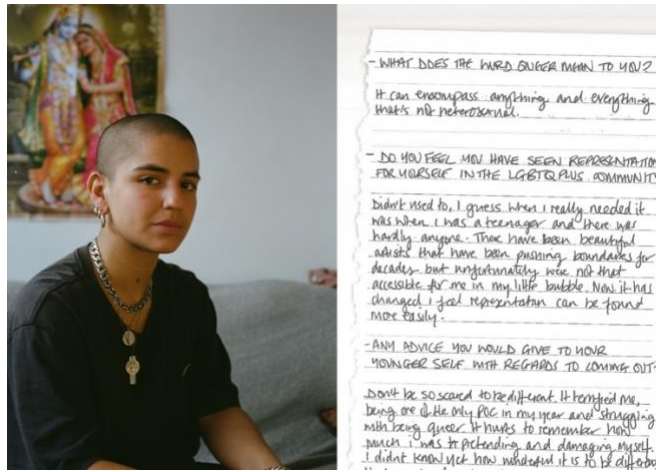


Figure 4 LGBTQ+ Letters, 2018, Heather Glazzard. Source: Heather Glazzard

<sup>5</sup> Glazzard, Heather. "LGBTQ+ Letters." *Heather Glazzard's Portfolio*, 2017, [www.heatherglazzard.com/queer-letters#1](http://www.heatherglazzard.com/queer-letters#1).

<sup>6</sup> Webb, Bella. "Queer Letters." *1 Granary*, 2019, [1granary.com/interviews/queer-letters/](http://1granary.com/interviews/queer-letters/).

### 3. Embroidery and Queerness

#### i. Queering Embroidery and using it as a means of connection

In *Queer Threads*, Oldham gathers the work and interviews of dozen of artists working with queer identity through fiber arts, and at the heart of it all is stories and connection.<sup>7</sup> Embroidery is often associated with domestic work, with the archaic feminine, but by adding queer narratives into the process of embroidery and working with fibers, this past is reworked and subverted into something beautiful and modern. Artists interviewed re-enforced what I set out to do, the repetition and connectivity of the threads act as reinforcements for the stories and thoughts gathered and imprint them on a surface outside of the mind. Through creation of all these pairs of gloves I'm creating a sort of network, not only in my knowing these people, but connecting queer stories with one another, and sharing them for others to see as well. Not only does one queer embroidery by embellishing it with queer narrative, but by my doing it as a gay man I'm queering the gendered constructs of a craft.

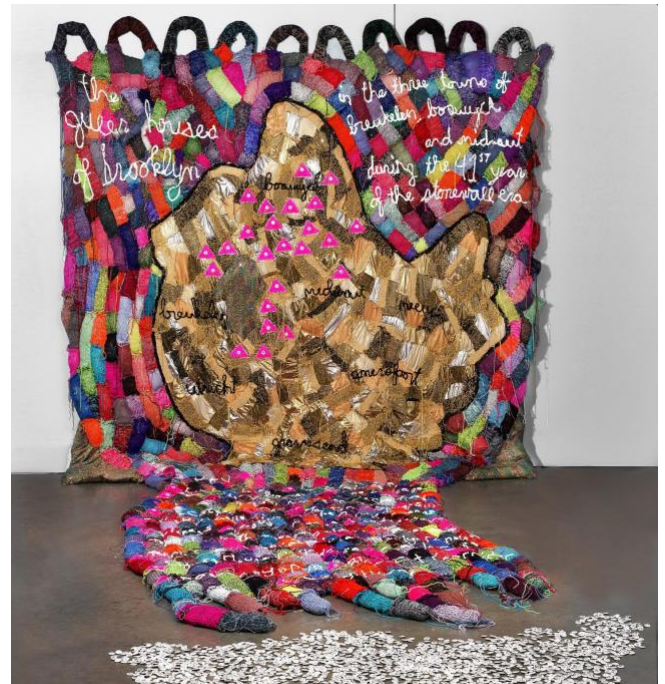


Figure 5 "The Queer Houses of Brooklyn in the Three Towns of Breuklen, Boswyck, and Midwout during the 41st year of the Stonewall Era," 2011, L.J. Roberts. Source: *Queer Threads*

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rosalia Parker discusses how embroidery since the Victorian age was automatically linked to femininity, and how it grew and evolved from there. Sometimes associated with the poor "artists looked to peasant art(embroidery) as a means in which indigenous cultural modes could reinforced as opposition to the dominant culture"<sup>8</sup> This gives credit to the power of embroidery, to its ability to communicate feelings on its own. "It can strengthen the rhythms of planes, intensify the style..."<sup>9</sup> Embroidery gives the gloves that I'm creating power and meaning, without, they would just be another pair of gloves. But with every stitch I make each glove more unique than it was before, to better reflect the queerness of those it represents.

<sup>7</sup> Chaich, John, and Todd Oldham. *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community*. Ammo, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, Roszika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Bloomsbury, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, Roszika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Bloomsbury, 2019.



## METHODOLOGY

During the first semester I realized that I was aiming to communicate stories, stories about intimacy, and how queer people experience it. I realized through audio that I wanted to focus solely on queer people, as stories of heterosexual intimacy and love are already the dominant narrative. At first This started with clothing, morphing into audio recordings, to finally settling on the making of embroidered gloves.

### Research

I returned second semester with fresh ideas, the main one being that I would return to making some type and or multitude of clothing in relation to queer intimacy. I would return to the idea of interviewing queer friends and make depending on what responses they gave me. I started collaging and thinking about what different garments I could make- a dress, corset, shirt, pants, jumpsuit, gloves, etc. I also spent a fair amount of time looking at artists, such as Tracey Emin and Catherine Opie. Having seen these artists up close in various gallery spaces I delved deeper, what made them tick, what did they focus in on? What I admired about Tracey was her ability to dig into her past for material, and then transforms it via her multitude of work. Catherine Opie's work offers a sympathetic portraiture of queer people, ranging from herself to the butch community that she surrounded herself with, to queer families across the United States. In "Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie."<sup>10</sup> Guralnik discusses the artist's impact on creating space for those often ignored. "When you isolate the face... you emphasize the question of identity."<sup>11</sup> This reminded me that I could still bring identity to the surface through something seemingly small.

I also conducted ethnographic research once I knew what form my project would take, I put together a pool of about eight different queer people that I either knew personally or through other queer friends. I then designed a welcoming and calming packet explaining my project, what the participant would be doing, and the questions designed to provoke reflection of one's own experiences with intimacy. I used a soothing font with rounded edges, as well as colors that resembled sunsets and oceans. For the questions I worked it down to six, reiterating that the participant could write as little or as much as they wanted for each one.

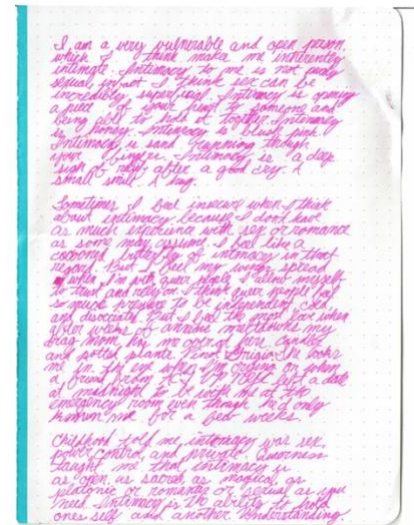


Figure 6 Scanned response from a participant in vivid pink ink. Source: Adam Van Osdol

<sup>10</sup> Guralnik, Orna. 2013. "Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 14 (3): 239–44.

<sup>11</sup> Guralnik, Orna. 2013. "Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 14 (3): 239–44.

## Feedback

In the midst of researching I sat down with Jim, the professor that would join Stephanie in conducting my IP section. We talked about my goals and my changes (he was on the mid-year panel) and what was important to me. He had been taking a look at the pieces I had pinned up on my wall, finishing lastly on a picture of highly detailed gloves. We discussed what could be pulled from one section of the gloves alone. This conversation set the ball moving for me to specifically make embroidered gloves, to focus on one part of the body, and one of the most expressive.



*Figure 7 Design process of fingerless gloves with background of enlarged scanned responses intended for physical exhibition.  
Source: Adam Van Osdol*

## Patterning and Sewing

I started with working with the most basic glove pattern I could find, and quickly realized how time consuming the process was, the hands have the most curves of anywhere on the human body to sew around. There was also the dilemma of making the measurements right to fit each individual. Faced with all of this, I created my own unorthodox method for creating each glove. I started by making a duct tape mold of each individual hand, then creating a pattern from it by cutting it out. To add nuance to the project I decided to make the gloves all fingerless, still covering part of the skin, but leaving the most sensitive receptors of touch exposed, and still able to feel with no barrier. For each person I selected different fabric and thread based on each story, black jersey to resemble a night sky, a tie-dye pillowcase to represent warmth and honey.

Due to the Pandemic, I started sewing in my kitchen as I tried to get the final measurements and molds from my participants. It became obvious that the final photoshoot was unattainable. In favor of completing the project and making it viable to show in an online space, I photographed the finished seven pairs of gloves in my home bathroom, creating a seamless with thrifted fabric. After my final submission I plan to send out the gloves, so they can be properly filled with each of their spirits.



*Figure 8 Process of making hand molds to then create custom glove patterns. Source: Adam Van Osdol*

## CREATIVE WORK:

The ideal final space for my work “Touch” was to be composed of the embroidered gloves, the stories blown up to large format, as well as photographs of the participant’s hands wearing the gloves. In this space, the viewer could start at any of the three points, glove, writing, or photo, and then try to work their way into connecting them, seeing what glove corresponds with what story, etc. The viewer can start to make sense of what symbolism is drawn from the writing, common themes between the participants, as well as the notion of wearing private, queer thoughts on the skin. Actively seeing how the body resides and is covered in certain ways by this, it also begs the question of what someone can touch, versus what we cover-up.

Due to COVID-19, this gallery space cannot exist yet.

Despite this, a huge part of my project, my curiosity, has been satisfied. I set out to realize and learn how other queer people experienced intimacy, and what moments overlapped with each other. I felt heartbreak, joy, and hope in reading all of their responses, and digesting each one as I figured out how each glove would take shape.



*Figure 9 Remote project documentation, photo studio created in a bathroom. Source: Adam Van Osdol*

## CONCLUSION:

The journey to the final stages of *Touch* was more complicated than I anticipated, but also more rewarding. This project was selfish in a way, it stemmed from a longing to understand my own needs when it comes to intimacy, the hurdles I've had to go through compared to all of the heterosexual people in my life. Creating work from anecdotes by queer people who exclaimed the same sentiments that I felt was validating and it created a feeling of solidarity, that I wasn't alone in my fear. I was lucky to have seven plus people willing to bare their souls to me through writing, to hand me their thoughts and fears and trust me. My hope is that when queer people see this project, they feel close to what I felt, that they're not alone. These stories are equally heartbreaking as they are uplifting, and for any viewer, I hope it offers a moment of reflection for their individual intimacies. Being a queer person in the pursuit of love and happiness can sometimes seem impossible, but I know now that our love and acceptance burns the brightest of them all.



Figure 10 Finished pair of embroidered gloves.

Source: Adam Van Osdol

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