

Authors:

Bulgaria

Atanas Totylakov  
Nadezhda Savova

Spain

Carlos Jiménez  
Marina Castán  
Tito Favaro  
Ivan Marín  
Jon Marín  
Ricardo Guixà  
Cristina Dordal  
Jennifer Molina  
Berta Peramau  
Mireia Rafanell  
Mireia Murciano  
Bentsgal Pérez  
Ibai Vellita  
Astrid Vives  
María Hernández  
Ainara Carreras  
Arnau Aguller  
Marta Álvarez  
Judit Camerá

Denmark

Oleg Koefoed  
Nikolai Troest  
Kajsa Li Paludan  
Helle Ansholm Rasmussen  
Karsten Tadie  
Mette Skau Smatz

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# TOUCH



„TOUCH“ is an international art project that explores tactility in relation to knowledge, creativity, cultural practices and innovation in art.

**The project is supported by European Cultural Foundation.**

TOUCH Project involves the FabriC Association, the International Council for Cultural Centers (I3C) and the Bread Houses Network (Bulgaria), ESDI (Spain) and Cultura 21 Nordic (Denmark).

## Cross-sensorial learning in the aesthetics of tactility

By Nadezhda Savova

Anthropology Department, Princeton University

Have you ever wondered what is the most pleasant texture to touch? Such question certainly cannot have one answer alone due to the wide variety of cultures and different access to and habits of experiencing diverse surfaces and objects depending on the environments we inhabit and the senses we involve in this habitation. Yet in my travels and anthropological research in 75 countries, I have discovered that the work with bread dough, bread being among the most wide-spread and sacred symbol, is also one of the most universally pleasant tactile experiences in its unique smoothness and warmth as well as interactive in the way it stimulates the desire and ability of people to mould the texture, turning the experience of touch from tactile (matter touched) into haptic (matter felt).

This at first sight simple discovery evolved into an innovative methodology of community-building, tested at the first Bread House *culinary-cultural center* that I established with volunteers at my grandmother's house in Bulgaria as a place where I experimented with collective bread-making events as regular community-building experiences bridging the gaps between blind and sighted people, generations, ethnic groups, and people with physical and mental disabilities. The method's ultimate simplicity was the key to its popularity and success nation-wide, and the method spread to other organizations in Bulgaria and, through my travels for conferences and projects representing the International Council for Cultural Centers, the Bread House model, both a metaphor and method, spread to 12 countries on 5 continents. It was precisely the deeply tactile experience of working with bread that became the occasion from which the TOUCH project started to coagulate and rise.

TOUCH as an international cooperation between artists and cultural scholars in Bulgaria, Denmark, and Spain evolved out of a workshop led by Bulgarian artist Atanas Totlyakov and myself, Nadezhda Savova, founder of the Bread House Culinary-Cultural Center, [www.bread-art-house.org](http://www.bread-art-house.org), in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, and the Bread Houses Network, [www.breadhousesnetwork.org](http://www.breadhousesnetwork.org), part of the larger International Council for Cultural Centers, [www.international3c.org](http://www.international3c.org). The workshop took place in August 2010 in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, and involved cultural managers, scholars, and artists from 20 countries and 5 continents who participated blind-folded in a series of co-creative experiences from collective bread-making to clay sculpting and drawing based on touching woolen objects made of traditional Bulgarian *gaitan* strings. The workshop was part of the First Summer School on Arts and Sciences for Sustainability in Social Transformation (ASSIST), [www.assist2010.ning.com](http://www.assist2010.ning.com), co-organized as a partnership between the International Council for Cultural Centers and Cultura 21, [www.cultura21.org](http://www.cultura21.org), with main coordinator Oleg Kroeford, and with the local cooperation of the Fabrik Association, [www.fabrikata.eu](http://www.fabrikata.eu), led by Mariana Nikolaeva, main coordinator of the TOUCH Project funded by the European Cultural Foundation. One of the participants in ASSIST, design professor Carlos Jimenez from the ESDI University in Sabadell, Spain, became the third TOUCH partner along with his team of design professors colleagues from ESDI. Thus, the TOUCH Project involves Cultura 21 Nordic (Denmark), I3C and the Bread Houses Network and Fabrikata (Bulgaria), and ESDI (Spain).

The TOUCH Project as a concept is based on the artistic work of Bulgarian artist Atanas Totlyakov, who has been experimenting since 1999 with tactile art or what he calls *non-visual/visual art* based on the perception of touch and art created by sight-impaired people together with sighted, blind-folded people. The artistic canon of Western culture has for centuries been based on the visual and textual paradigm of perception and truth, which defines why the artistic aesthetic canons have been tied to the visual and only slowly over the last decades have started to involve more interactive means of perception and engagement, through installation and performance arts integrated with mixed-media visual arts experimenting to engage the other senses through various textures, sound, and movement, and slowly but at least explored including the experience of food and taste.

The TOUCH Project developed a series of experiments in co-creation to start laying the foundational stones of a whole new aesthetic canon in visual arts that can embrace the tactile experience of art pieces, or what we term the *aesthetics of tactility*, building on the works of artists and philosophers Marinetti and Epstein in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The working hypothesis of the TOUCH project considers that the sense of touch of visually impaired people may be a creative and experimental site for exploration and re-evaluation of what constitutes visual art and a departure point for understanding bodily and thus through deep, embodied empathy the experience of the blind which could help us develop programs that integrate sight-impaired people both as creators and audience for artistic works.

The question of empathy or "feeling into" rather than "feeling for" (often misunderstood as pity sensed from a position of distance and superiority) as explorations of embodiment into the experiences of the sight-impaired is the vantage point from which I reflect on the issues of tactility in art through my anthropologically-framed participant observation role as the main analyst of the project, whose processes and effects (and affects) I registered through interviews and participant observation with a total of about a hundred people from the three countries part of the project. Empathy in the process evolved as the experience of co-habitation of the creative ideas as well as daily experiences of people in diverse positions of sensorial perceptions of the world as they were all engaging in what I would call *cross-sensorial learning*, where touch and vision were not seen as binary sensorial worlds, but rather tactility became the complementary element to visually pleasing art pieces, as in the works of Atanas Totlyakov and his students, and at the same time tactility opened new possibilities for engaging all the other senses into the experience of visual art and design.

TOUCH enabled sighted and visually-impaired artists, art students and art lovers from three European countries - Bulgaria, Denmark, and Spain - to make and experience contemporary art together by placing themselves in the position of blind people through blind-folding and freely experimenting with unconventional combinations of media, from visual art-works on anything from plastic to scratched CD surfaces, to music & sound art, design, bread, clay, soap, wood, and textiles, as well as a variety of bodily movements without the participation of sight through spaces ranging from densely populated urban streets to forests and the insides of a house and a labyrinth gallery.

The project's longer-term educational and socially-transformative goal is to promote at the national, regional, and EU policy levels models for innovation, inclusion and participation in the arts for visually impaired people, as art education in most countries is still traditionally thought as a visual activity, even when framed as participatory and engaging learning experience through the "visual thinking strategies" (VTS) employed in museum education. The Bulgarian context in particular is a fairly conservative art field, where tactile art is unknown to the general public. Museums and art galleries have sporadic exhibitions, mostly with ceramic objects presented as tactile art, and only few make use of tactile diagrams and touch tours, but these are not spaces that offer possibilities for co-creation of art and the engagement of both sighted and sight-impaired people.







The TOUCH Project's various workshops involved sighted and sight-impaired people seeking to develop together an *aesthetics of tactility* through two main approaches. The first approach involved the innovative and alternative treatment of objects and textures such as: de- and re-contextualized daily objects (Carlos Jimenez, Tito Favaro); thermochromic textiles (Marina Castan); foods, in particular bread, as in the artistic and design experiments of Ivan Merino and in my work experimenting with a particular form of interactive performances called Theater of Crumbs. The Theater of Crumbs was employed in the TOUCH Project to engage artists from ten countries and local people from all ages during the International Arts Symposium in Biala, Bulgaria, in June 2011, as they made puppets out of bread, crafted and improvised performances as exercises in interpreting and solving social and environmental issues through the use of children's books characters (such as Pinocchio and Hensel and Gretel). Ivan Merino on his part organized the participants to make for themselves bread noses attached with a string to the face, and each one was encouraged to tell a stranger from the group a

truth, inverting the dynamic in Pinocchio where his nose grew every time he told a lie, and in this case rather people could bite off each other's nose upon both agreeing that the statement was true (subjectively true for the couple). This digestion of each other's truths was combined at the end of the improvisation of the play with the bread puppets with a ritual where all the en-actors (as I call the participants in this improvisational theater method) shared the bread (the puppets) as an act emphasizing the importance of "digesting" issues not only intellectually but also bodily in order to be able to address them in a holistic manner the way the human is a holistic physical and psychological being. I call this process *problem digesting* as an additional element and facilitating process to standard brain-storming problem-solving methods, playing on the discursive allusions to intake and participation of the senses of touch and taste yet the paradoxical detachment from the stomach in our linguistic framing of the process of contemplation.

In addition to the first approach focused mostly on texture and objects, the second approach to developing an *aesthetics of tactility* involved developing a whole array of new discursive ways to analyze and describe the tactile art dynamics expanding on Russian philosopher Michael Epstein's works on "haptics." Such new language was evolving as people in the workshops at the Spanish National Association of the Blind (ONCE) were crafting new ways of describing beauty through the language of sensorial experiences other than mediated by vision. A garden was no longer simply defined as "beautiful" since this concept did not hold any sensorial information for the blind person, but when the space was described as a "delicious garden" with "juicy grass," the experience of aesthetics could set aside the eyes as main registers and start relying on the tongue and the finger tip.

The TOUCH Project showed that once vision is shut, the senses cannot and are not separated as people dependent mainly on visual perception often assume; rather, the five senses complement and enhance each other. Furthermore, the experiences with the blind in Carlos Jimenez's work at ONCE using object poetry to engage people to modify the meaning and functions of daily objects revealed the enormous power of human imagination and the sense of humor, where it is key to point that humor is, indeed, spoken of as one of the senses! The sense of humor revealed the human agency to expose and/or create alternative realities beyond the visual as well as beyond the immediately tactile and the functional and into the realm of the imaginary, which can be very real and liberating once understood as a viable alternative within a lifestyle lived through the sense of humor intertwined with the other five senses.

Observing the comments of sighted and sight-impaired people about the senses, I noticed a pattern in how people more dependent on the dominant visual and linguistic modes of communication tend to divide the world into sensorial spheres similar to the ways philosopher Jurgen Habermas noted the modern world has been divided into discrete spheres that need to communicate ever more with each other and comprehend their multiple *de facto* yet not formally perceived overlaps. For Habermas, the enactment and understanding of the overlaps across the spheres from economy to the arts could take place through a vibrant public sphere in. Through the TOUCH Project, we observed how creating spaces for cross-sensorial co-creation opens precisely this much needed "public sphere" where people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ages, both gender, and with diverse abilities (rather than "disabilities") could meet and interact in both playful and serious fashion, learning from each other in the process of awakening and exploring their sensorial worlds. The public sphere places in the project range from arts classrooms open to students and community members in Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria) to community cultural centers with wood-fired ovens as the Bread House Culinary-Cultural Center in Gabrovo (Bulgaria), and from the workshop spaces at the National Association of the Blind in Barcelona (Spain) to a mobile sensorial labyrinth in Copenhagen (Denmark); all different in shape, size, and the sensory experiences they propel, but connected by the concept of the importance of what I would call *interactive regularity* through on-going and non-class-based interactions and opportunities for cross-sensorial learning.

I base the cross-sensorial learning concept on the rich anthropological literature on embodiment noting how the human body gets inscribed with, imbues and enacts the cultural and social norms of a society while at the same time is able to invert these norms precisely through the particularity of each body and psyche: themes classically studied from the works on *habitus* by Marcel Mauss in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Bourdieu to more recent works in the anthropology of the senses (Csordas, Seremetakis) and the anthropology of affect (Mazzarella). Cross-sensorial learning as a conceptual framework describes the importance of understanding and challenging the artificial divides in the sensorial spheres of the modern Western world. A key and tangible example is the way taste in the West is formally reserved for the home or the restaurant space versus the way street food in the developing world is present all over the public space domesticating ever more the anonymity of the public space by giving it a home-kitchen feel.

In the bodily reactions and comments made by the participants in TOUCH and the general public that to the exhibits it could be noted that the cross-sensorial learning was opening a certain "ritual of passage", as defined in classical anthropology by Van Gennep's *rites du passage* and later in Victor Turner's study on the "liminal space" of transition and transformation through collective rituals. Sighted people across the various cultural contexts in the TOUCH project expressed amazement at the sensations of peace and tranquility that they derived from the feeling of losing notion of space, size, dimension, and time when sight was shut and the suddenly unknown world became both an object and a subject, both the thing one was experiencing and the experience itself enveloping the person with all of its rich sensoriality. It is precisely this sense of losing grip of the known time and space and entering a domain of the unknown and the potentially transformative or liminal space that defines the process of a "ritual of passage," where the participant is ultimately reunited with the known time and space yet already enriched and to a certain extent transformed by the liminal experience that offered an alternative perspective, even if not one that could be enacted on a regular, daily basis. The importance of imagining and experiencing even for a limited temporality the alternative experience of the other, such as a life lived without vision, is a transformative experience in itself as it opens up the possibility for questioning and imagination as the first necessary steps for any transformation.

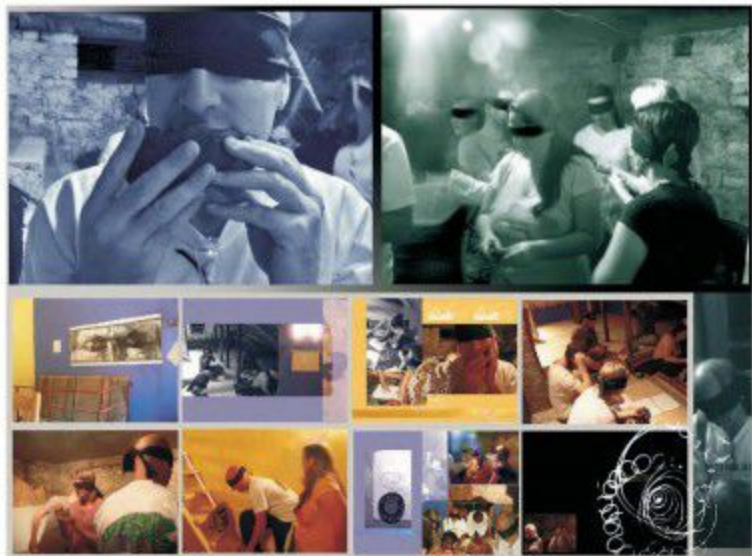


Psychologists have researched various tactile and sensorial experiences to find correlations between cognitive and sensorial perceptions, and tactile art could be a site of rich data for further investigation on the ways in which the brain and its cognitive capabilities change and develop as people engage more of their senses in various combinations and with varied intensities. An interesting point is that psychologists have found that to answer the question why people like eating with their fingers and most non-Western cultures still preserve this cultural habit as a core of their traditional foodways one physiological and psychosomatic explanation is that the area in the brain registering taste is located in direct proximity to the area registering touch, and thus the tactile signals sent from the contact with our fingertips when tasting food provide for a rich cross-sensorial experience that enhances the perception of taste. What more intriguing cross-sensorial experiences could evolve out of mixing the tactile experiences with the other senses? These are the questions raised by Nikola's tactile labyrinth in Denmark and Atanas' mobile dark gallery in Bulgaria, to which the workshops started offering some fascinating insights.

Sighted people were further surprised to discover the complex ways in which sight-impaired people gather multiple kinds of information from the surrounding world through all of their senses engaged at once. Thus, here a key issue for the aesthetics of tactility is the challenge of cultural translation of concepts and experiences. Indeed, in order to create a new aesthetic system of terms defining the tactile in the non-visual visual arts, one needs to first comprehend the difficulty of translating from one cultural context to the other or from the language of one social sphere to the other in this case, from the tactile to the visual, as much as it would be complex to translate economic indicators into artistic terms - the main difficulty being how to communicate visually-informed terms used by the sighted people and non-visually-informed, or synthetically sensorial, terms used by the sight-impaired people into the language of a new aesthetics of tactility.

The findings from TOUCH can be brought back to the visual culture and design in multiple ways in order to respond often in unexpected, humorous, and creative ways to diverse human needs in the fields of ergonomics, accessibility to movement through spaces, experience of art works, and entertainment, etc. The exploratory creative journey that the TOUCH Project initiated now invites artists, cultural managers, and cultural policy makers to also embark on this exciting research and examine ways in which the cross-sensorial learning method could be applied in a variety of social, cultural, and educational settings, from arts schools and museums, galleries, and community cultural centers to other social spaces such as hospitals and centers for people with physical and psychological special abilities, elderly people's homes and orphanages, connecting and cross-pollinating the social spheres in the same way we are invited to connect our senses. Based on the findings of the TOUCH project and the years of research for my dissertation on the social role and impact of community cultural centers, what emerged as a key issue at the concluding stages of the project is how to secure the sustainability in the application of these findings and methods of work. To this, I suggest focusing on the power of community cultural centers and arts spaces to become hubs for regular inter-generational and inter-cultural gatherings where people could be stimulated to engage in cross-sensorial learning, for which a crucial factor is the regularity of engagement with the tactile and the other senses, or what I would call *sensorial accumulation*: in this sense, it is crucial to provide spaces offering universal access to people of all backgrounds to be able to engage their senses and tap into their creative potential on a regular basis.

In addition to further studying the application of tactile art in various social and educational settings, what would be intriguing to explore in the future is the development of tactile art in diverse cultural contexts around the world, as some cultures have very distinct sensorial schemata in terms of the importance that certain textures and tastes hold for the culture and that its people are more apt at enjoying and enriching. Could tactile art then be an innovative bridge towards inter-cultural dialogue, where the process is rather *inter-cultural doing*, as already observed in the processes of collective bread-making by people from various cultural backgrounds? Could the describing of the world through translation of cross-cultural and cross-sensorial experiences be a new way towards peace-building? If we say "we are touched" when something moves our heart, then it makes sense to explore our senses to their fullest beauty, mystery, and potential to hold hidden answers to some of our modern quests for co-existence.



International Summer School of Arts and Sciences for Sustainability in Social Transformation: ASSiST 2010 - day 1 evening activity at the Bread House in Gabrovo: tactile art workshop by Atanas Totlyskov, and bread-making workshop by Nadezhda Savova. For more information, please visit: <http://essist2010.ning.com/>



## Beyond the assumed: object poetry as an expressive resource

Author: Carlos Jiménez

This experience begins when, after a short training in braille and typhlo-technology, I'm kindly invited to join the incipient "Club LectorONCE Barcelona", a shared-reading open group under Elvira's coordination, the always inspiring educator and librarian from the ONCE (Spanish Institute for the Blind). Along five months, around 10-15 people from different backgrounds (professors, students, poets, rhapsodists...) ranging from 15 to 82 years old, constituted as a community of practice, met weekly to learn and enjoy reading, creating and declaiming poetry together.

This group was integrated by visual and non-visual impaired mates. Braille and Roman alphabet books coexisted on the table. As a sign of initial embarrassing ignorance, I was shocked at the discovery that several false myths around blindness, perception and disabilities in general must be overturned by those we? who are meant to contribute to a better society through designing for all. "The essential is invisible to the eyes", this Saint Exupery's sentence included in *The Little Prince*, unfolded its whole meaning and potentiality here.

Within this context, I proposed a workshop to create poetry using daily, humble objects. The object poetry has been practiced widely since the first XXth century avant-gardes, yet it is relatively unknown by wider audiences used to a more classical written and versed poetry. Authors like André Breton defined it as a composition that tends to combine resources from poetry and plastic arts, speculating about its reciprocal exaltation power. For writer Octavio Paz, this is "an amphibian creature living among two elements: the sign and the image, the visual art, and the verbal art. An object-poem can be simultaneously contemplated and read". On his side, Catalan poet Joan Brossa, affirmed that a thing may have a sense, but the poet can take it, turn it and give a different meaning to it. For him, metaphors can be made either from words or objects. In fact, for him objects are metaphors by themselves.

There was one more reason to experiment with object poems which I used it as a working hypothesis during the workshop; we easily get used to obstacles, built environment and material culture deficiencies in general. And most of the times we accept it as something normal. We take it for granted and we don't apply our creativity potential in daily life as we could. So, by exploring the hidden expressive possibilities of things playfully, trying to go beyond their assumed functionalities, we may find new answers and broaden our previous limitations.

So we, as active and creative individuals, host the capacity to change those things not fitting our preferences.

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Typhlo-technology is the adaptation and accessibility of the TIC for its use and benefit by blind people or visually disabled persons.

I proposed the assistants to bring a common object with them from their homes as a base to poetic creation. We experimented with des- and re- contextualization, modification or annulment of one or more of its main functionalities, we looked for formal analogies, we put it in improbable contact with other objects, we changed its name... We learnt that rhetoric figures (such as metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy...) can be applied not only to literature but also to our everyday life. The closer the objects are to us, rooted to our memories, the more we get surprised when they are modified unexpectedly. Using semiotic terms, some kind of fruition occurs when the allomorphic result replaces the expected isomorphism. For instance, one of the blind participants told cheeky grin- that when she was a child, she challenged her limitations ingeniously by using the umbrella upturned as a basket to catch as many candles as possible among those thrown to the crowd during the Christmas cavalcades.

The results from this workshop, together with several explorations around shared reading, were exposed in a final party at the ONCE's library (a few images are included). The modified objects addressed a wide range of questions with a lot of humor, absurdity, irony and criticisms: a juice squeezer for tennis balls, a *Guardia Civil* hat (Spanish army), white glove filters to retain taxes and commissions from dirty businesses, braille chocolates including poems to be read, shared and eaten, an educative device to learn braille using egg cases, a replica of the "spring water" sandals used by immigrants to escape from police after crossing the salty and dangerous Gibraltar Strait, and many others.

Here at the end, objects were just things that let us start conversations to talk about Things, understood as everyone's concerning issues. Through object poetry, we assembled socio-material narrations and networks.

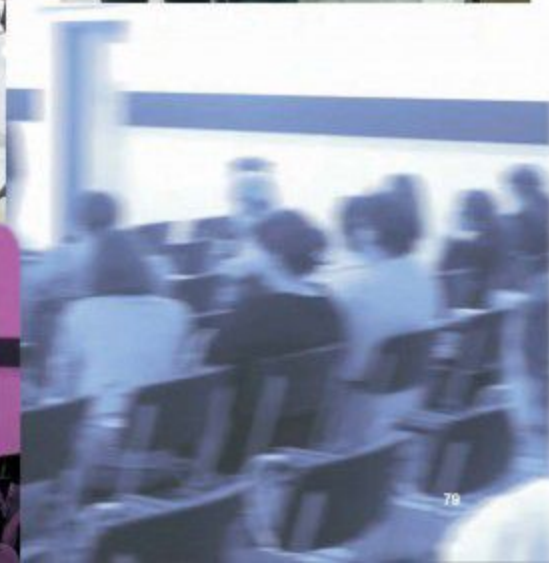
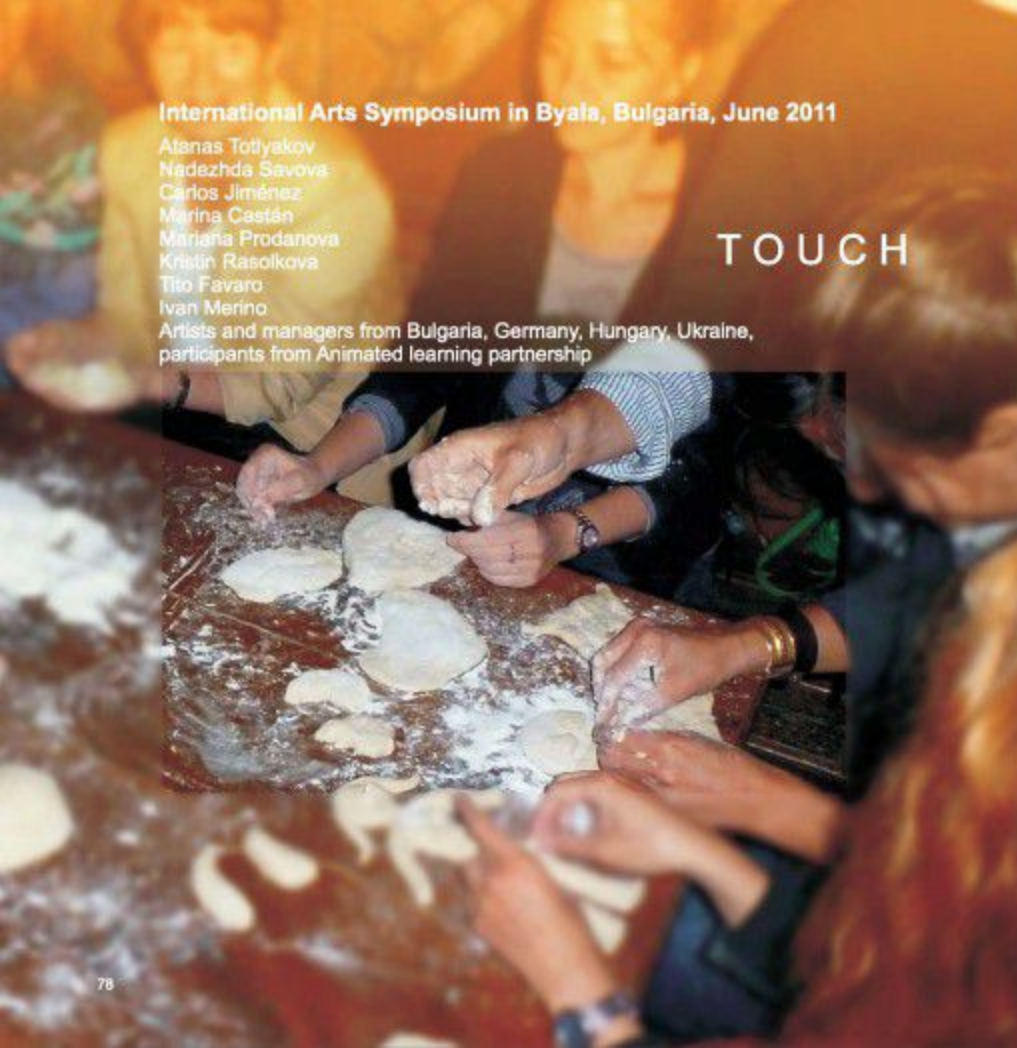


International Arts Symposium in Byala, Bulgaria, June 2011

Atanas Totlyakov  
Nadezhda Savova  
Carlos Jimenez  
Marina Castán  
Mariana Prodanova  
Krislin Rasolkova  
Tito Favaro  
Ivan Merino

Artists and managers from Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Ukraine,  
participants from Animated learning partnership

TOUCH







## Opening of TouchVille in the atrium of the ESDI, Sabadell Higher School of Design

Final TOUCH exhibition, November - December, 2011

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Kristin Rasolkova  
Tito Favaro  
Ivan Merino  
Professors and students from ESDI

# TouchVille