



Patty Chang Explores Rituals of Touch

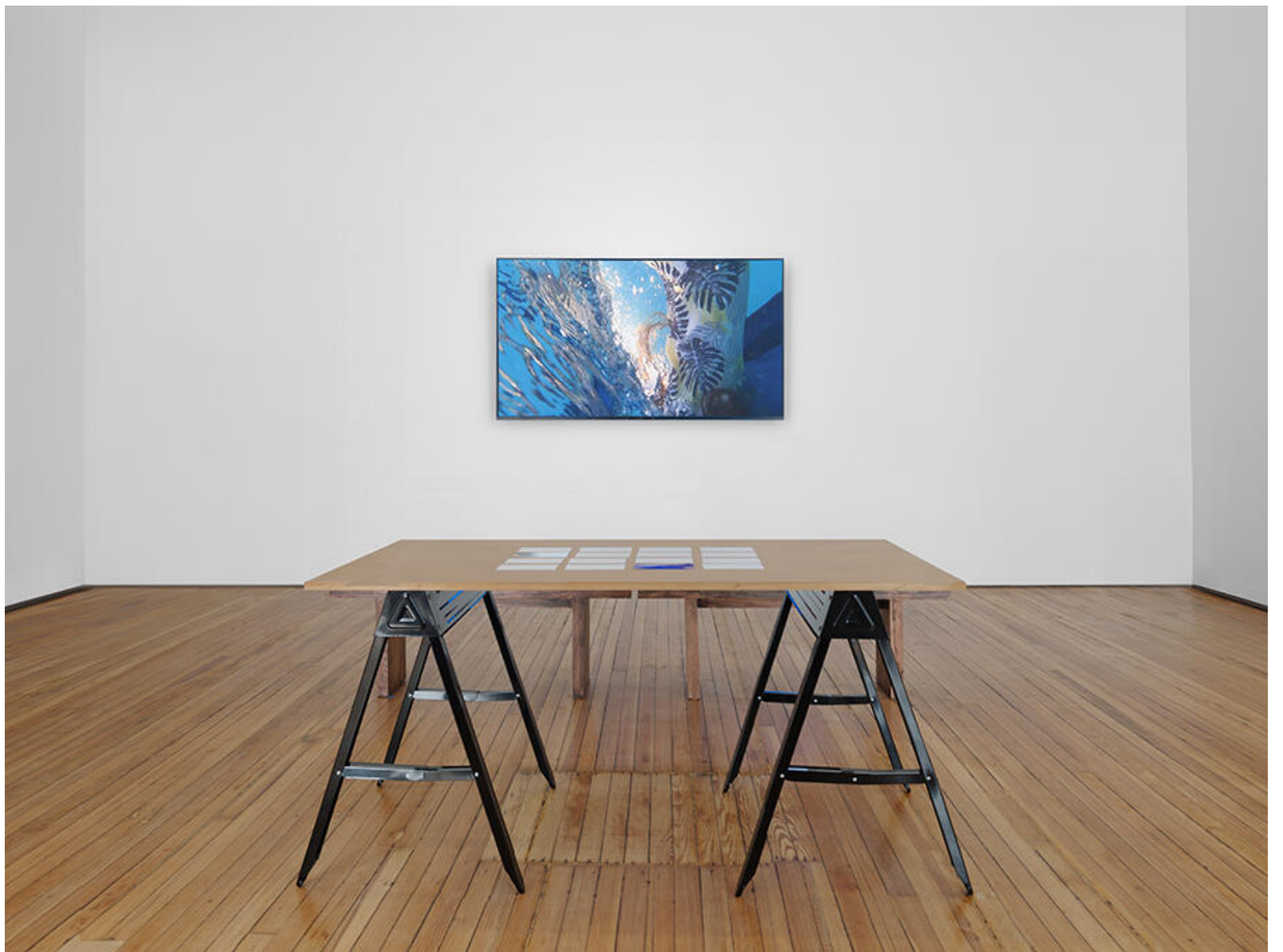
At BANK NYC, the show is most effective when it engages with haptics at a distance

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BY LOUIS BURY IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 08 APR 25



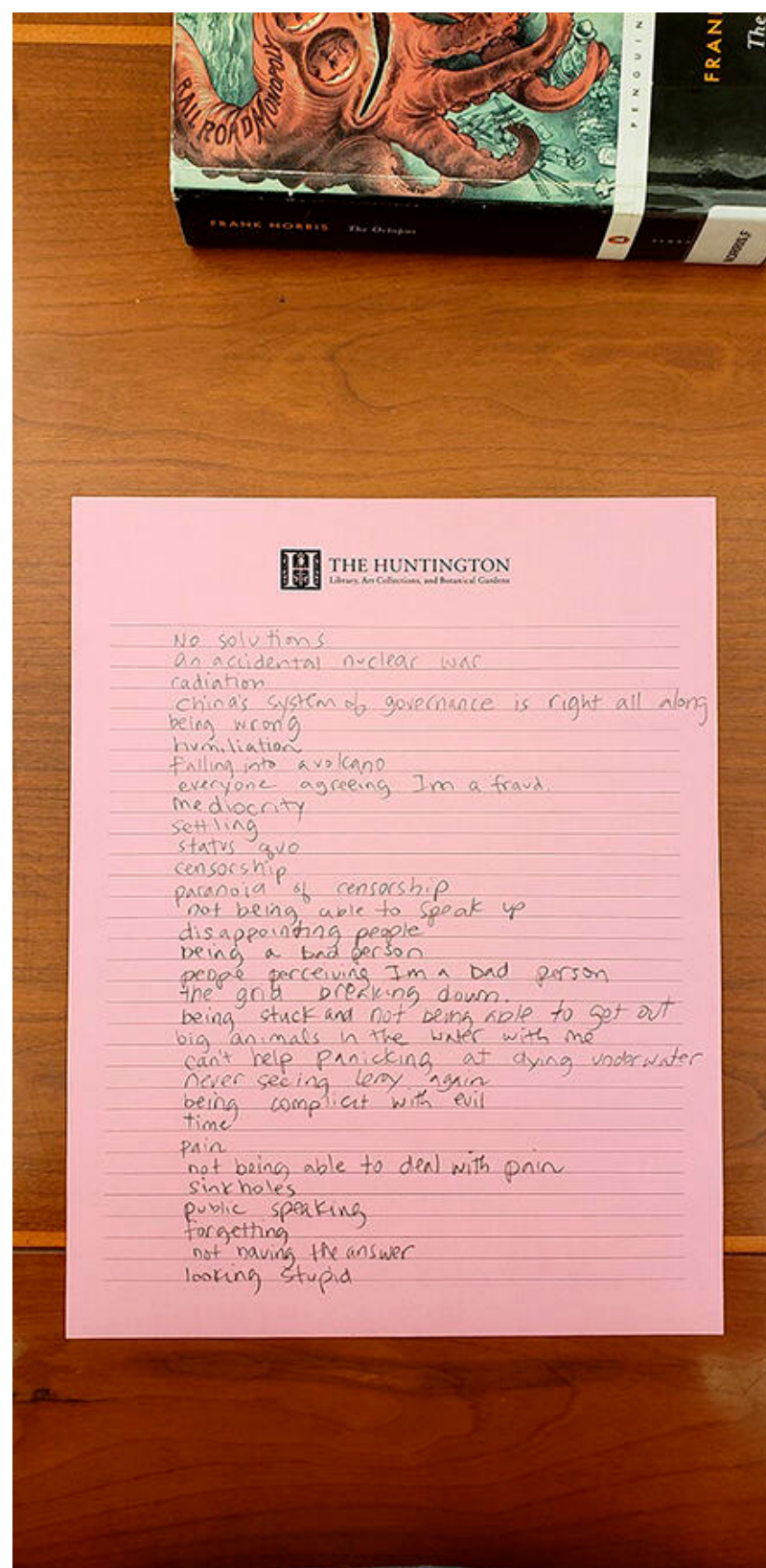
Patty Chang's spartan BANK NYC exhibition, 'Touch Archive', proves quite touching, if not always in the intended ways. Its centrepiece, *We Are All Mothers* (2022), is a ruminative 20-minute video essay based on a collaborative research project, *Learning Endings* (2022–ongoing), that the artist undertook with veterinary pathologist Aleksija Neimanis and cultural theorist Astrida Neimanis. On a nearby table sits *Memory Game* (2022), a grid of 16 facedown photographs depicting the veterinarian's gloved hand touching deceased harbour porpoises; the exhibition didactics encourage visitors to flip over the photographs, two at a time, to reveal and try to match the images. The interactive artwork instantiates the video's haptic theories, but the video itself suggests that art's power actually derives from the intellectual distance that mediation affords.



Patty Chang, 'Touch Archive', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and BANK NYC;
photograph: Inna Svyatsky / @installshots.art

A substantial amount of the touch depicted in *We Are All Mothers* occurs at a physical or aesthetic remove. Its necropsy scenes, recorded over Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic, are framed by the Apple toolbar on Chang's MacBook; the artist and her writer collaborator appear as tiny rectangles in the screen's corner. The veterinarian, who occasionally breaks with scientific protocol to perform touch rituals on the corpses she dissects, wears gloves throughout. Other scenes portray human mothers expressing breast milk through plastic pumps; this leitmotif, inspired by Neimanis's unexpected discovery of breast milk in a porpoise's stomach, alludes to Chang's 2021 project, *Milk Debt*, about mothers' need to purge literal and metaphorical toxins. Even *We Are All Mothers's* closing scene – shot from an underwater perspective as Chang's child, Leroy, swims in a pool – has a muffled feel, echoing the artist's earlier observation that porpoises' 'life below water is kept to themselves'.

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Patty Chang, *Things I'm Scared of Right Now* (detail), 2018, four archival inkjet prints, 25 × 51 cm each. Courtesy: Patty Chang and BANK NYC

Chang is a master at weaving disparate autobiographical threads into lyrical artworks with collective resonance, including *Milk Debt's* lists of her own and other mothers' fears (shown here as photographs, *Things I'm Scared of Right Now*, 2018). *We Are All Mothers's* meditations are no less profound, as when Chang contemplates how 'many artist-mothers find crisis in their work when they give birth', and affirms that 'art is not more important than nurturing, or having and raising a child'.

The curious thing about 'Touch Archive' is that its video provides a far more convincing aesthetic experience than the interactive artwork meant to embody the theories that underpin the video – akin to how some sports fans would rather watch a game on television than attend it in person or play it themselves. In the video, Chang speculates, 'perhaps the archive [lives] in each individual act of touching', becoming 'transferred, at [that] very moment, into the body of the scientist'. Yet nothing so mystical or moving occurs when the visitor handles *Memory Game's* photographs; if anything, the activity feels gimmicky.



Patty Chang, 'Touch Archive', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and BANK NYC; photograph: Inna Svyatsky / @installshots.art

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In that same video passage, Chang asks how the scientist's touch rituals might be extended 'to a wider degree', given that touch is 'such a one-on-one intimate gesture'. *We Are All Mothers* stands as one answer to that question: it teems with poetic images and ideas that not only portray touch but also contextualize it. While touch can't easily be experienced at scale, art can still convey its impact, even from a second- or third-hand distance. This dynamic chimes with theorist Anna Kornbluh's much-discussed 2024 book *Immediacy*, which values aesthetic mediation as a way to resist contemporary capitalism's cultural drive toward speed and immersion. Chang has grappled with related concerns throughout her career, particularly in her feminist performances that are grounded in the body but feature discursive reflections. Such work touches audiences in a figurative rather than literal way, which, when it comes to art, can be just as effective – if not more.

Patty Chang, ***'Touch Archive'*** is on view at BANK NYC, New York until 26 April

Main image: Patty Chang, *Memory Game (detail)*, 2022, tables and inkjet prints, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and BANK NYC; photograph: Inna Svyatsky / @installshots.art

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