

Imaginary Touch

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There is a paradox about touch. It is the reference sense for presence, for appropriation, for verifiability. I grasped it. I felt it in my bones. He has his feet firmly on the ground. She got it. I have it in hand. *Tango ergo sum*, we might truly say. It is the sense we turn to when we take hold of things, even, when we attempt to lay hands on the other senses. It is perhaps for this reason that Democritus declared that there really only was one sense, the *sensus communis* of touch, which provides the workings for all the others; vision is light filming the eyes, hearing, particles of matter pinging on the ear. If we use a visual word when we speak of imagining touch – making an image of it – that imaging is always suffused with the senses of weight, shape, warmth, texture, traction. Every image is in part apprehended blindly, that is, at the tentative, unseeing fingers' ends.

And yet, for this very reason, touch is the most, well, intangible of the senses. Here is how we might articulate the paradox: we depend upon the idea of touch, the idea of that which is so immediate that it slips beneath, shoves aside or pushes through idealisation as such, and yet it is this which tends to turn touch into an idea: One example is the word 'tends' – from Greek *tenein*, to stretch, a word that itself forms the tautest, tenderest filament connecting words and sensations like tone, tune, tenor, tenement, tentative, tension, restraint and intention. There is always a bit of a stretch in touch. Touch is always just beyond itself, on the tip of its own tongue, on the topmost tippytoe of our thought.

Plato says in the *Theaetetus* that there are innumerable nameless senses. Perhaps touch is the name for this very swarming. Touch multiplies itself into many different modalities, all of which seem to have some relation to the primary sensation of touch, but a relation that has no root value or experience. What might be the specifically 'tactile' component at work in toothache, taking off in a plane, tapdancing, testing the bathwater, tracing a tetrahedron, being tickled, twiddling your thumbs, and saying 'tut'? We are more stupid than our bodies (though there is no shame in that) about touching: touch is a gaunt, bony word for the shimmering aurora of different sensations that arrive at or pass through the skin, or the imagined skin. For we do not need the

skin to feel tactile sensation: wherever we are solicited to such sensation, a kind of imaginary skin is procured. There is even a skin, the finest, most subtle of all, that stretches across time, as when we feel a shiver and say that somebody has just walked over our graves. In fact touch is never exacty here and now. A touch is always either flaring up or fading out – there is no persistence in tactile sensation, which must be repeatedly renewed, by stroking, caressing, percussion. Not the least important of the modes of touch's non-presence is what I have called the light touch – the touch that holds back, that is almost but not quite not a touching at all.

We live in a world, we have got into the comfortable habit of telling ourselves, of virtual touches: of teletactility. I think perhaps we always have, from the moment when we first pointed a finger or waved a hand. The very word that we use to signify a relation between signs in which some actual touching has taken place, the hollowing of a matrix by some physical impress, or the touching of sensitised paper by light that gives us photography, the word indexical points to pointing as this primary action of touch at a distance. Pointing stretches an imaginary wire or thread from the finger's end to the designated object. Desmond Morris suggests intriguingly that the clapping of hands is an abridged embrace. We cannot speak or think without manipulating, actually, or in imagination, some imaginary matter, some plastic stuff of thought, that is endlessly being stretched out, divided up, twisted, compressed, or blown away. It is doubtful that there could have been any geometry, that most abstract and disembodied of sciences, without the implication or intervention of modalities of touch. Michel Serres has memorably defined the act of thinking in terms of the actions we characteristically perform when we do it, touching finger to lip, or temple, or crossing arm on arm, or leg over knee. This is why thinking is reflection, and the fact that human beings can touch themselves almost all over may correlate suggestively with their capacity for self-reflection (and it is therefore little surprise to hear of the intelligence of octopuses).

It appears that as the kind of primates we are, means that we are scripted to perform a mimetic shadow dance whenever we watch movement, putting our fingers into the sockets of the pianist, moving in formation with the things we see, going, as we say, through the motions. Very few of us are able to read silently, without forming a miniature little version of the spoken sounds, that some have claimed to be able to read out from the shiftings of the musculature. There is no more intense and subtle experience of shared or implicated touch than listening to speech. We engage in full oscular participation, in the blowing of the aspirates, the percussion of the plosives and the dentals and, most particularly in the scraping of the gutturals. We share a sense of the difference between

sounds made in the front of the mouth, where the tongue can make out all the interior furniture with ease, providing a kind of flashlight to light up palate, gums and teeth, and sounds produced from the nocturnal, bestial crepuscular space before or behind articulation, in the throat, that we can feel only dimly and intermittently, and that gets deployed in the articulation of animal content or anger. Language depends upon this sense of shared, hypothetical voice-bodies, a kind of collective homunculus, endlessly under construction and in dissolution. It is a particular delight for me to be saying this here in Liverpool, one of the last redoubts in England of the voiceless pharyngeal fricative - the magnificent catarrhal sound at the end of the word 'cack'.

The artists whose work I have seen in the Liverpool Biennial seem to me to respond richly and variously to the sense of imaginary touch, of touches at a distance, touch relayed and mutated into other kinds of thing. I think of the cool heat of the little votive wicks sprouting from the objects in Jamie Isenstein's *Empire of Fire*, or the elaborate play of pushmepullyou tractions throughout Danica Dakic's *Grand Organ*. In fact, the title of that work provides us with a motto for the sense of touch as it is spread out like a vast, variegated integument, skeining across and between the different works in Touched: touch is the grandest, the most magnanimous and hardest working of the organs. The organ is the most diffused and distributed of instruments, the one in which voice and gesture is most multiplied beyond its point of origin. Where exactly is an organ, in a cathedral? It is almost everywhere. *Organ* is related to *ergon*, work, energy, and the organ of touch is indeed a series of workings. The skin is the largest sense organ, not just because it contains all the others, that are all involutions of the skin, but also because it is contained in them. It is the largest organ of the body, because it is larger than the body, the organ of ecstasis and excursus.