premsela.org/ lecture'11/

> **Out of Touch**

By Richard Sennett

Out of Touch

Discussions of the senses go back to the beginnings of philosophy, but the speculations are frustrating, at least to me, because they are usually so abstract. The physical world contains secrets which cannot be unlocked without reflecting on your own sensate experience. I'm going to try to unlock one of these secrets, the sense of touch. To do so, I'm going to speak to you as a musician, not as a social philosopher, drawing on my alternative life as a cellist who performs chamber music.

The most important thing about a musician's sense of touch is that it becomes refined; the more skill a musician has at his or her command, the more sensitive become the fingers. This seems obvious, but the obvious leads in some surprising directions. Skilled, sensitised musical touch reveals something about the loss of those same qualities in the realm of everyday experience – a loss social critics frame by the general term "dematerialisation". In general, that word refers to the paradox that the modern world is filled with material things to consume, governed by machines for communication and production, yet at the same time the users of these physical things have become numb to what they hold in their hands or touch with their fingers; in everyday life we have become desensitised physically.

If you happen to be an old-fashioned Marxist, you have a ready explanation for dematerialisation: the consumers of physical things are alienated from making the objects they consume; they have lost physical consciousness of things by being merely, passively consumers. If you are a postmodernist of another stripe, you might blame the objects. The modern world is filled, you would say, with simulacra and representations of objects, as on computer screens, and these substitutes have effaced the physical sensations of the things themselves. The refined touch of a musician suggests quite another way to think about desensitisation and dematerialisation in everyday experience. The fingers' skilled production of sound opens up truly philosophic problems, of which I'll describe three: first, what skilled touch reveals about the divide between inner and outer life; second, the value of resistance; and finally, the lessons of ambiguity. These seemingly abstract philosophical issues become manifest in everyday activities, which run the gamut from the use of computers to the practice of politics. The lessons of touch also apply to creative work in other fields, particularly visual design, from

drawing to the making of buildings. A musician trying to press a metal string onto wood accurately and expressively knows more about these large matters than he or she might imagine.

Inner and outer

Every cellist learns the sense of touch through mastering movements like vibrato. Vibrato is the rocking motion of the left hand on a string which colours a note around its precise pitch; waves of sound spread out in vibrato like ripples from a pool into which one has thrown a stone. Vibrato does not start with the contact of the fingertip and the string; it begins further back at the elbow, the impulse to rock starting from that anchor, passing through the forearm into the palm of the hand and then through the finger.

There are as many kinds of vibrato as there are cellists – focused movements like Janos Starker's, liquid like Pablo Casals's. Vibratos of different kinds can be put to different uses; the rocking tone introduces a modern sound to Baroque music like the Bach cello suites, which in Bach's time were played without coloured notes; in modern music, vibrato can help us find the semitones or effect the crossings-out of defined notes favoured in the music of Stockhausen and Elliott Carter.

Vibrato is a physical capacity, which ripens in the course of a cellist's formation. Freedom to rock requires that a cellist first master the capacity to play perfectly in tune. If a young cellist lacks that mastery, every time he or she vibrates, the note will sound sour, accentuating the inaccuracy of pitch. Even when we use vibrato to gain entry to the contemporary world of semitones, we must have a precise tonal centre to aim at. There are acoustical reasons for this distinction between the sour and the vibrant, having to do with the overtones set going by a string. But the need for mastery of pitch in order to vibrate well tells an elementary truth: freedom depends on control, whereas purely impulsive expression produces just mess. This piece of common wisdom is as true of the hand as it is of the heart.

But even once this technique mastery is gained, vibrato poses a danger to cellists, especially young ones, when they begin to perform in public. I want to describe that danger in some detail, because it reveals something important about the meaning of touch in establishing the distinction between inner and outer experience.

I have yet to meet the musician who walks on stage with the same

carefree insouciance that he or she might feel in walking to the bank or in practicing in private – though it has been said of an innocent like Fritz Kreisler that he barely noticed when he played in front of thousands of people. For most of us, when we are faced with performing, adrenaline flows; the stomach tightens; we need to withdraw before the event into a concentrated silence. When we walk on stage, we enter into a peculiar state of relaxation, a trance in which we become hyperalert.

In this trance our bodies can betray us, and nowhere more so than in the work of vibrato. I can describe what happens fairly concretely. The vibrating forearm suddenly promises to release the tensions we have built up in preparing ourselves to perform; energy flows into the forearm and away from the hand. Often the wrist begins to flex, further cutting off the transmission of energy from elbow to finger. The result of this short circuit is that the weakened hand begins pushing too hard on the string in order to recover strength; the fingers lock onto the fingerboard beneath the string; and movement then becomes jerky rather than fluid. These concrete events are what may make a musician sound "nervous" to you, even in the midst of technical pyrotechnics.

Of course nerves – fear – is the culprit, beckoning the body into a false promise of release. But more, the cellist who loses control of vibrato generates on stage a division between inner and outer experience, between idealisation inside ourselves of what the music should sound like and outer expression of how it sounds to others. "Nerves" have a physical foundation: the touch of the fingertip to the strings has ceased to be the performer's focus; the contact between flesh, steel and wood has ceased to define a zone of hyperalert attention. Then the musician's own perceptions of her- or himself performing split in two; one half is the interior domain of what the music should sound like, the other the domain of achieved expression, which fails to measure up. Once set going, this divide may last only a few moments, in which the artist is aware the music doesn't sound as it should, and then disappear, as the body takes over and the artist's inner "it-should-be-other" fades away. Or this divided consciousness of oneself making music can last, fatally, all evening.

There's a leap we can make from the artist's world to everyday life. In our ordinary experience, anxiety can lead to withdrawal. This was the great theme, nearly two centuries ago, of Alexis de Tocqueville's writings on America: fear of what one's neighbours might think led the people whom Tocqueville observed to retire inside themselves. In another vein, the connection between anxiety and withdrawal served

as a theme of Georg Simmel's writings: people wear, he said, a mask in public life, appearing neutral or rational, whereas behind the mask their subjective life seethes. It's behaviour you see every day on the streets: people don't show what they feel, indeed fear to show it, as in the evasion of eye contact on the street.

The musician's experience of faulty touch, leading to uncontrolled vibrato, turns these commonplaces about withdrawal and masking into another channel: withdrawal appears more centred on the individual's own expressive control rather than on what others think. Anxiety focuses on personal inadequacy, which leads to nerves, which leads to idealisation, which leads to splitting inner and outer. For the artist, this great divide comes from the sense that "I have failed myself" rather than that "others don't understand me" or, as Simmel would have it, "other people are a menace." Idealisation and internalisation come from an inability to touch others.

Is the inability to arouse others expressively a problem for the psychiatrist or for the sociologist? I don't wish to deny the medical profession clients, but I'd argue that the impairment does have a social side. There are few social skills that parallel the discipline in art of dealing with vibrato. I've noticed this lack of expressive skill in the domain of "netiquette", those social codes meant to rule interaction online in blogs and chat rooms. As yet, there are in fact few rules for communication online to guide the flow of communication so that it deepens as people pass ideas and comments back and forth. The net analyst Sarah Ashford sees net communication as dominated by egotism. The philosopher Bernard Williams speaks of a "fetish of assertion" that occurs, particularly online, in communications between people; this fetish means people are constantly thrusting forward their views but not taking much in; our listening skills online are far weaker than our argumentative skills. Perhaps we are overly assertive when we are afraid of others; perhaps we simply want to dominate them; perhaps the technology – so centred on sheer visual display – has not developed a "netiquette" for dialogue. Whatever the reason, the result is that communication withers. We aren't mutually responsive if every assertion is met with a counterassertion, but more importantly, we aren't listening critically to ourselves.

Sensate touch may seem at a far remove from this communication problem, but actually it sets it in context. The musician dealing with a crisis of nerves in vibrato is keenly attuned to what the music sounds like to others; he or she is schooled to listen to him- or herself. Like anyone else, the musician can respond to a failure to

communicate by withdrawing and idealising, but all of his or her training is aimed at recovering from that condition. Online, however, there are few norms for expressive self-criticism; the huge glut of email messages people deal with today can prove numbing in its sheer numbers, but in a chat room or Web 2.0 forum we face a further difficulty. There are few compelling social norms, few social techniques to guide us in responding to outside stimuli. In the chat rooms in which I dwell, one consequence is that online communication frequently feels inadequate and frustrating; people feel they are struggling with saying what they really want to say, even though they are full of opinions. Internalisation has set in. Another way of describing this frustrating divide is to say that in everyday computerised communication we are poorly trained performers – and because of that lack of performing skill, when we fail to touch others, we withdraw, and within that withdrawn state we ponder what we really think or feel, what we should have said.

If you are critically minded, you might immediately say that when we speak about verbal communications "touching others" we are using a metaphor, not describing a physical sensation. I'd dispute this. Physical arousal and stimulation occur in verbal communication; the online realm itself has proved sensately alive in the use of mobile phones, Twitter and Facebook during the so-called Arab Spring revolts. The machines aren't the problem; rather, social attitudes are the problem when these communication tools prove instead desensitising.

Just as sensitive, skilled touch helps the musician bridge the gap between inner and outer, so this physical prowess addresses a second expressive issue full of social implication: the experience of learning from resistance.

Resistence

The nervous musician has encountered physical resistance to his or her desires. But the experience of difficult touch can also be vital to the musician's understanding of how to work with his or her own body, or with the instrument he or she plays. The cello is an instrument that contains a physical defect that resists easy remedy, the defect appearing when the cellist plays the E and F notes on the G-string. Most cellos are physically imperfect in this region; even some great Guarneri cellos, powerful and solid instruments that they are, have a tendency to fracture these two tones into a kind of bleating noise like a sheep's call. To vibrate these notes on the G

string is to risk making a particularly ugly sound. Yet the cellist, faced with this challenge, may learn a great deal from it.

For instance, when I first performed the Schubert cello quintet with the great cellist Jacqueline Du Pré – she was barely adolescent at the time – she was fascinated by a famous moment in the trio of the third movement when the first cello becomes mired in this E-F danger zone. In rehearsal, she played with the bleating F tone, making it bleat even more; she exaggerated her vibrato to see how bad she could make it sound. She discovered that the ugly noise could be transformed into a wild, accented sound if she drew back her bow toward her neck as the bleat began; the result of her rehearsal experiments was to enhance her special way of playing. Like the singer Maria Callas, Du Pré was a wild artist, so impassioned she seemed on the verge of losing control. But both wild musicians, I think, were instead testing the limits of resistance, exploring just that liminal zone between raw, rough sound and shaped musical tone.

It might be thought that musicians like Du Pré are fighting resistance, either in the cello or in the vocal chords. But just the reverse is true. When these wild musicians get into that liminal zone, they apply minimum force; rather than assert themselves against the resistance; they lighten up their own application of physical power in order to deal with the impediment. Du Pré, for instance, showed me how to lift the bow slightly at the danger point in the Schubert quintet so that the move back from F to E could be accomplished as an accent; when Callas got into challenging territory while singing a famously demanding passage in Bellini's "Norma", she similarly held back her breathing volume rather than forcing more air through her windpipe. The application of minimum force is indeed an aspect of all skilled craftsmanship; the carpenter hammering into a piece of wood, encountering an unexpected, hidden knot, will lighten his blows in order to test and explore what's there.

The use of minimum force is all about what could grandly be called the dialectics of resistance. The artist or craftsman learns how, as it were, to befriend resistance, to work with it rather than fighting blindly against it. If this sounds special, think of the parallel process in a scientific laboratory. The researcher finds something going wrong – a piece of equipment that doesn't work as it should or a strange, disorienting result in an experiment. Like Du Pré, the laboratory researcher should investigate: perhaps there is some promising reason hidden in why things aren't working smoothly. Using minimum force in response to resistance allows curiosity to

come into play. I was much struck by the language the sociologist of science Sarah Franklin uses to describe this moment in the laboratory: she says it is the scientist's experience of being "intensely in touch" with the data.

In the performing arts, meeting resistance with minimum force has a seemingly odd effect: it is relaxing. Faced with a testing moment, the body knows how to calm itself. It's generally true that, in becoming curious, we enter into a suspended state, dwelling in the moment, holding back and reflecting rather than forcing ourselves forward. This is an acquired skill in music. At potentially difficult moments, for instance, the cellist has to learn not to press hard with the thumb of the left hand under the cello's neck; tensing up, gripping rather than touching the neck, would make the left hand rigid. We learn instead how to experiment with disengaging the thumb entirely in executing difficult passage work. In the performing arts – dancing and acting as much as music – relaxation is an acquired skill, gained only by learning how to minimise force. By working in a skilful way with resistance rather than fighting against the presence of the impediment, the artist or scientist can turn outward rather than inward, connecting with the world in all its roughness, hardness and difficulty.

There's a strong contrast here with certain everyday experiences of resistance. The more ordinary impulse is to reduce resistance by making it disappear from consciousness. "User-friendly" computer programmes, for instance, do not correspond to a musician's earned, learned ease, nor are they designed to promote the skill of deploying minimum force. The idea behind the "user-friendly" computer programme is to hide all complexity from the user, to minimise the experience of mechanical resistance; as the computer analyst John Seely Brown once put it, the technology should become "invisible". It's certainly true that if all the objects in our environment proved difficult to use, if we were constantly aware of their complexity, we'd be driven crazy. But an unconscious ease of use of things carries a cost that is both cognitive and social.

This observation can be applied to two aspects of creative work in the visual realm. Consider, first, the role touch plays in the act of drawing. Drawing by hand in pencil or ink is how the visual designer experiences touch; this physical act is far more uncertain than the drawing that is done on screen by plotting points A and B and then commanding the computer to make a line between them. But hand-drawing is a far more searching activity: through physical contact with paper and pencil or pen, the designer takes a journey from A to

B, feels what the connection is like, tests alternative routes. A hand tremor or a sudden wrong move may be put to creative use, suggesting a more expressive line than the computer's logical connection between points A and B.

Of more social consequence is the role resistance plays in the visual making of the most solid elements of everyday reality – that is, the design of buildings. What happens when buildings are constructed as user-friendly machines? All buildings have programmes that define particular uses of space. Modern buildings tend to have particularly defined programmes. Every square metre has its allotted function, and functions in modern buildings, even in small structures, are tied tightly to physical properties like energy consumption, plumbing, lighting and heating. All of this makes buildings easy to use: the programme lays out what you should do; the coordination of function to properties shows how it should occur. You know the object from the moment the doors of the building open.

However, these easy-to-use, fixed-function objects ask for submission in use rather than engagement. You are meant to do what the building tells you so clearly to do. There is a disciplinary regime built into user-friendly objects. The discipline of user-friendliness can induce a kind of disconnect, in which we are no longer curious about why things work as they do. In so-called smart buildings, the inhabitant can be rendered more passive than in structures that require interpretation because they are not legible, straightforward, easy – the sort of buildings made, for instance, by Zaha Hadid. User-friendly architecture is less engaging than her difficult, challenging work. In the computing realm, this same contrast can be drawn between Apple and Linux software kernels, the Apple kernel is easy to use but opaque to its users, while the Linux kernel is more difficult to use but more illuminating to the programmer exploring its difficulties. The easy building, street or computer kernel ceases to function like a laboratory, or, more physically, like those problematic E and F notes the cellist has to explore on the G string.

Ambiguity

Perhaps the musician's powers of touch have most to tell us about ambiguity. As a social analyst, I believe the great danger in modern culture is its relentless pursuit of clarity and definition, in defining national, religious, ethnical and sexual identities; modern society does not embrace ambiguous identities. By seeking clarity and

definition, the culture legitimates a repressive politics. This pursuit is foreign to the artist's evolution, in which clarity is instead achieved by organising and formalising ambiguities; the musician knows this alternative search for form in the experience of fingertip touch.

Let me give an example, from early in the musician's career, of creating form from the ambiguities of tone. One way for beginners to learn to play notes in tune is for the teacher to plaster little bands of tape across the fingerboard, so the kids know exactly where to put their fingers. This is the foundation of the so-called Suzuki method; its appeal lies in the fact that that the fingerboard is an uniform black, blank surface, offering no hints about where the fingertips should go. Yet once the seemingly helpful bands of tape are removed, the kids are surprised and chagrined. Not only are their fingers now lacking direction, they find they haven't really been making good contact between fingertip, string and wood; the tape weakens solid contact at that crucial intersection. A better procedure for imparting the experience of touch contact is therefore to leave finger placement more ambiguous; by searching where the fingers should go on the black, blank fingerboard, the student also gets a fuller physical experience of contact itself – the very essence of touching.

To be sure, clarity of one sort is the goal: the young cellist needs to learn where precisely to put his or her fingers in order to play in tune. But this is a result arrived at by induction – experimenting not only with the fingertip but with the curving of the entire finger, the height of the wrist, and the angle formed between elbow and wrist. An ever-larger number of possibilities begins to appear as one finds exactly the right place for a finger pressing a string to make contact with the wooden fingerboard. Furthermore, this supposedly pure note is in fact physically many possible notes; vibrato, as we've seen, colours that tonal centre; moreover, the temperament structure of Western music means we place our fingers somewhat differently when we are playing the same note in C sharp minor and in D flat minor. The same sound – a note in tune – encompasses many alternatives in the body. In technical jargon, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between means and ends; instead, good form requires a coordination of possibilities, a management of alternatives. Coordination of this sort has to manage ambiguities rather than erase them. Form means assemblage; assemblage arrives at clarity rather than starting with it.

I make heavy weather of this issue just because society does not think

about form in this way – at least, modern society does not when it addresses the idea of identity. To follow what the musician knows about touch, modern society should look at identity as a multiple phenomenon: each of us contains many identities, as lovers, parents, workers, and citizens, identities that we experience at the same time and that pull us in different directions. In principle, good form in managing identity should resemble the work of assemblage that occurs in the performing body: an effort of coordination that keeps ambiguous possibilities intact. But in practice, modern society has not operated this way. We like our identities clear-cut and easy to use: German versus Turk; heterosexual versus homosexual; success versus failure.

The political instruments in the 20th century that enforced a clear-cut, singular national identity rather than a multiple one were appalling. Today, society's war on ambiguity has shifted ground to civil society. In the sociological realm I know best, that of labour, the modern workplace is supposed to be a scene of assemblage, in which people coordinate fluid skills with a constantly shifting cast of characters. But that image applies only to the elite. In fact, the labour realm for most people has been subjected to a rigid process of definition and simplification, thanks in large part to rigid management systems like SAP that define tasks and contacts with mechanical sharpness. What was once called Fordism in the realm of industrial labour has returned to shape service work, making it ever more precise in terms of execution and communication. The appeal of SAP programmes for managers is precisely that they eliminate ambiguity in the work process. Induction from experience – the worker's own searching interpretation – does not figure much in the system; the management system directs more than enabling feedback and correction through hands-on experience. In this way, labour in civil society is moving further and further from the inductive work of form-making and assemblage in art. Workers subjected to SAP frequently complain that the system is "out of touch" with experiences undergone on the ground in the office or shop as people deal with the complexities of coordinating labour.

The effects of this functional, disciplinary space have been studied by myself and many others. Such spaces of power produce a reaction of physical indifference and disconnection among the servants directed and controlled. Dulling your physical awareness in a highly controlled or hostile environment is a natural defence mechanism; you retreat inside yourself, where others can't get at you. But you also suffer through that defence mechanism; you have no way to concretise your discontent or objectify your anger. Domination

succeeds when it produces this kind of material indifference to one's surroundings among the subjects of power.

I've wanted to show you why that image of being "out of touch" is literally correct rather than metaphorical. The artist's physical experience of becoming in touch provides a critical standard for assessing why people feel that imposed clarity and precision can render them out of touch with their own labours.

Let me end this talk by returning to the issue with which we began. Inner and outer define the dimensions of subjectivity. I want to argue to you that as society effaces the lessons contained in physical touch, as it dematerialises much of our experience in using machines and in thinking about ourselves, a new regime is coming to the fore, one that heightens subjectivity. I want to recall to you something Voltaire once wrote to Madame de Pompadour: "I had a fair conception of who I was when I reached the age of reason, perhaps more talented than other men but like them; I had only to study their characters to know myself and read my own heart to find there the evidences of all humanity." In the wake of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, few of us could be comfortable subscribing to this statement. But the alternative, the subjective self taken to be an eternal puzzle, is no more endurable and sustainable. We cannot spend our lives trying to unravel what we desire, what we are longing for, in an endless inward state of becoming. The reason I've dwelt on the lessons art promises for everyday life turns on finding a way out of that labyrinth.

The great danger of modern subjectivity, psychologically, is that it disposes people to imagine that reality is failing them, failing to measure up, or, again, that the actual self with its constraints and limits seems inferior to that idealised being whose existence is a wistful possibility. "If only", "I should have" and "I had hoped" are key phrases in this language of idealisation. It is a language that subverts engagement with the world's difficulties, prevents such engagement from doing its work of freeing the self from the self; a door closes on the insistent, dissonant noises outside.

Many modern philosophers and social scientists have written on the perils of subjectivity in this idealising form, from Arendt and Habermas on the philosophical side to Robert Bellah and Anthony Giddens on the social side. And yet I must confess to a certain discomfort with these critiques. Subjectivity is contested; objectivity remains equally disembodied, as a communicative process rather than a physical experience.

I don't want to conclude on that gloomy note, however. Much of the art I'm now seeing, reading and hearing made by very young people, in their late teens and early twenties, has an taken an encouraging direction: it emphasises craft skill and material engagement. In America, at least, we are in the midst of a repudiation of theory-driven art, a repudiation that is not conservative, I think, but driven instead by a renewed appreciation of sensate engagement. In new music, especially, I'm hearing work designed to be played rather than read in scores: new crossover music, for instance, demands revision by jazz musicians of how they blow, finger, and bow their instruments, and classical musicians like myself are also revising the use of our instruments. What I'd like to see is a cultural discourse equally enmeshed in the qualities of things and, moreover, a politics of objects that opens them up to divergent performances, truly flexible uses. Embedding the senses in a resistant world is a political project, one that, as I've tried to indicate, would have the consequence of challenging the disciplinary regimes of ease and clarity of use. A physical world more available to touch might help to lift the cursed regime of inward desire. I've tried to show in this talk, in sum, how the physical practices of art might help us to understand how to be more in touch socially with one another.