

TOWARDS THE ORIGINS

Unit 2 research paper

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It seems as if my generic interest in human bodies and performance led me to realize of the special relation established between hands and bodies and the importance and power of such limbs.

Our bodies are essential to the development of our cognitive skills, they engage with reality through the use of the senses. Rodaway identifies the body “as the site of all the other sense organs and the brain” and considers it as “our primary tool for movement and exploration of the environment” (1994, p. 31). As demonstrated in numerous studies about the subject introduced by Rodaway, cerebral evolution has been possible because of our locomotory adaption to the world around us (Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p.26).

Corporeal languages

While having a physical experience, by reason of their biological nature, human bodies are also a “culturally defined artefact” according to Featherstone (Featherstone, 1991). By touching, grabbing and holding, our bodies sense physically our surrounding reality, furthermore “Gestures are movements of the body that express an intention” as Flusser would say (2014, p.1). Our hands are the most suitable and sensitive members of our body to execute these actions. They are not just very important for our evolution but also for the means of communication that we have developed. We have created alphabets and languages through the use of our hands because of their expressive qualities. They are together with our faces the factors that allowed the “process of modelling of thought into instruments of material action” and therefore “into sound and symbols” according to Leroi-Gourhan (1993, p. 187-188).

At this point we should ask to ourselves what is the relationship established between bodies and languages? In the installation *The Whisper Heard* (2003) by Imogen Stidworthy, the artist explores the complex relations between languages, senses and consciousness. An old man, Tony, seems to grasp the meaning of words while reading a Jules Verne's novel. But not being capable of reproducing all the words he looks for other alternatives to translate what he is trying to say by doing gestures with both hands. On the other hand, a young child, Severin, is able to repeat words easily, but without a full understanding of them shifting between the linguistic and the paralinguistic, performing through mimesis his speech.



Imogen Stidworthy, *The Whisper Heard* (2003)

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In Bruno Munari's *Supplemento al dizionario italiano* (1963), we see a collection of the most common gestures used by Italians when speaking and their respective meanings. Other studies such as *Gestures, their origins and distribution* (1979), focus on the gesture boundaries and their conceptual formulation based on different places in Europe. In visual arts, sculptures by Bruce Nauman come to mind. In *Fifteen Pairs of Hands* (1996) and *Falls, Prtfalls and Sleights of Hand*, Nauman instrumentalises bodies effectively to convey a message free from all historical determinisms, Nauman's hands strengthened by their neutrality, show themselves as "acts of personal creation", in which humans

demonstrate not to be passive in the world but responsive to it by their communicative skills (Nauman, 1998, p.82). As Tucker says, “Man alone among animals is able to symbolize, to respond not only to the direct effect of a stimulus on his body, but to a symbolic interpretation of it” (Tucker, 1998).



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Bruce Nauman, *Fifteen Pairs of Hands* (1996)

Dismantling systems

The question of responding to phenomena comes translated into the same reaction as when encountering an artwork, which triggers a process of symbolization in all of us. A very interesting field is introduced by Cage in his keenness to show the importance of the participation of the audience in a piece of art –“Things become more useful expressively when they are not expressed by the artist but (when they are expressed by the person) receiving them” (Sontag, 1989, p.31)-. In responding we process things on a personal and collective background. The unconscious is brought forth by consciousness, as psychoanalysis has proven (Foucault, 1989, p.374). When language is uncovered, the

words written in the Book of Genesis “In the beginning the earth was without form and void” become true, we see that human rational systems are “empty” and “despotic” according to Foucault. In reality desire and death dominates everything, true madness is the truth and the alterity to the rational system built by men (Foucault, 1989, p.375).

In this reign of desire and death, Cartesian dualism seems to be defeated by madness. In Jasper Johns' *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (1963) mind and body, memory and gestures mark and print their traces. Face and hands contemplate human transient existence and the inevitability of escaping our human fate by shifting madly all across the piece of paper.



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Jasper Johns, *Skin with O'Hara Poem* (1963)

“Inframince”

But where are the borders between consciousness and unconsciousness? Where do body and mind converge in space? Husserl's phenomenology studies about consciousness are regarded by Merleau-Ponty as consciousness 'being towards the thing through the intermediary of the body' (1962, p.139). This connection brings us to the things themselves, and enables us to access them because of our body's ontogenesis. He speaks of 'the emergence of the flesh as expression' (id., p.145) and about 'motility' as the 'primary sphere' where meaning and significations are shaped in space (id., p.51). Penone's works bring us close to this dimension in which the most subtle and fine thing is what draws the border between inside and outside, we and the world around us, "Inframince" is the word given to such thing by Duchamp. But both things are not seen as irresponsive and distinguishable but as part of a whole that is divided by a thin layer that makes casting possible (Penone, 2007, p.217). Body as volume and sculpture as skin has not just been explored in relation to what intermediates us and the world but also as a trace or a memory in a negative space as in Gabriel Orozco's *My Hands Is the Memory of Space* (1991) (Gabriel Orozco, 2009, p.56).



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Gabriel Orozco, *My Hands Is the Memory of Space* (1991)

Sacred and profane

Derrida's deconstructive analysis in *The Truth in Painting* ponders an interesting question "What must truth be in order to be owed [due], even be rendered [rendue]? In painting?" (Derrida, 1987, p.4). What he identifies as *pass-partout* seems to be a kind of limbo or sacred frame that allows truth to take place in painting (id., p. 11-12). There seems to be a curtain or velum between us and the artwork, the subtle line in between, '*inframice*' is suspended framing the truth of painting. Eternity can be seen when we peer into this other dimension.

Antony Gormley alludes to this inaccessible space in his drawing *Origin of Drawing IV* (2008), where the shadow is linked to the legend of Dibutades daughter drawn on the wall told by Pliny, and therefore to the platonic metaphor of the cave and to the origins of art and its aims (Gormley, 2011, p.83). Space as something that draws the borders between the sacred and the profane, *plinthoi* that separates the earth from the holy place, from the temple, from the *sancta sanctorum*.

But what is inside this space that seems to be beyond our reach? How can we, mortal beings, access it? Is there inside the profound enigma that keeps the secret of human nature enclosed? It would be too pretentious to try to uncover such mystery in this essay, but on the other hand all the ‘theater’ displayed around the answers humans have found to their existence, which could be identified with their beliefs shaped within a religious dimension, opens a new prospective from which we can approach the question about man in general, taking into account his historicity and unconsciousness rather than a scientific approach to analyze it (Foucault, 1989, p. 376-378).

Sensorial rendition

Theatrical performance has a transformational power to modify how our brains perceive the world. According to Di Benedetto ‘sensorial perception is intrinsic to the power of theatrical representation to transform the human experience’ (Di Benedetto, 2010, p. X).

The play with the aural, visual, tactile, and aromatic is something embedded in the liturgy of a religion, a set of norms that once in action speak to our senses. A language or code used rhetorically to frame the center of an experience. Such means can remind us of the language displayed by Baroque art. In *Saint Theresa’s ecstasy* by Bernini in Rome, visual,

aural, tactile, and aromatic is taken into account: morbid carnations and fluttering clothes can be sensed by the mastery with which they were sculpted whereas the aural and the aromatic are satisfied by the songs and burning incense of the sacred liturgy.



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Saint Theresa's ecstasy* (1652). Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

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Dual states

The idea of “the primitive” and the respect for the supernatural converge when consciousness and unconsciousness play together and take us to a different dimension, that of contemplation and ecstasy (Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p.4).

Again, life and death write our history marked by an ongoing existentialist quest. Dual states as a point of contemplation of our human condition can be seen in the disturbing dancers' bodies twisting but petrified at the same time by Berlinde De Bruyckere in *Into One-Another* (2010). In between live and death, she shows the dualities of human existence: *'body and spirit, love and suffering, sensuality and death'* (Aaronson, 2015, p. 329).

Being more aligned to a tradition of sculptural practice, Louise Bourgeois explores psychological and emotional states of the body. Its functions and habitat are something passively experienced but performed (Bourgeois, 1998, p.74). In *End of softness* (1967), the tension and contradiction of material and subject appeal to us for its binary conception in which *hard and soft, seductive and repulsive, form and formless* get together (Coxon, 2010, p.44).



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Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Into One-Another* (2010)

Dionysius versus Apollo

But how do those primal human features can be seen through our cultural layering now, in today's society? Where can we see present and most distant past converging into one same thing?

As seen in the film *Medea* (1969) by Pasolini, rituals take different shapes over the years and myths are present in our rational conception of the world. The unconscious meets the conscious and brings humans back to Earth, to their origins, Dionysius meets Apollo.

Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957), explains how embedded are myths in our modern society. In doing so he sees in our every day's habits, customs and reactions a link to ancient theatre.

Conclusions

The ideas we have tried to underpin seem to shift somehow from the Apollonian to the Dionysian. Firstly we have pointed out at our evolution as human beings to introduce the idea of bodies in motion. And to do that we have considered that we can talk about it in regards to the biological nature of the human body on one hand, and therefore on the connections between brain and limbs. On the other hand, we have considered human bodies as a cultural artefact. Both things converge in the development of body languages, and hands appear to be a subject of interest after all.

Secondly, we have introduced the idea of how we respond to the phenomena, to other beings and casualties and the conventions established behind scene. A nonsense system is uncovered to show madness as a true reaction before death and therefore to human existence.

Thirdly, we have tried to find in time and space where consciousness and unconsciousness show themselves in relation to our material reality, Duchamp's term "*inframince*" might suit such endeavor. This same term has led us to mention distance and space as a border between life and death, between us and the sacred, and our longing to access it.

Fourthly, the involvement of the senses in relation to performing a ritual or a play could be consider the threshold to access such frontier. Ecstasy, as a kind of initiation to a

cathartic process seems to position us in-between life and death, love and sorrow, suffering and cheerfulness, longing and desire for the divine.

To finish with, the question of where can we see tangible models of myths in our times must be raised back again. Myths give an answer to our biological and cultural nature, as explored in Pina Bausch's *1980*. There we see how different micro societies are constituted, and how commonality develops together with the eccentricity and personality of each individual. (Morgan, S., 1984, p. 182).

What is a myth, today? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: "myth is a type of speech." (Roland Barthes, Mythologies, 1957)

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