
Introduction

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*"The man, who holds his head with his hands and touches his hair, is apparently listening to a lecture. He is stained and tired and wants to make sure by this gesture that his brain still works all right."*¹

The text of chirological researcher Charlotte Wolff (1897–1986), *A Psychology of Gesture*, systematically examines our gestures of early childhood, especially hand gestures, from where preverbal movements start at birth, and remain the most important means of expression until the age of five or six, to adult gestures of power and powerlessness. There are many types of gestures, they may be different dependent on our background and origin, but as Wolff states, "gesture-language is practically the same in all human beings, and it follows that it must correspond to the primary level of existence, comprising instincts and emotions, on the one hand, and an elementary knowledge of objects on the other. It is only abstract thought which cannot be expressed in the language of gesture."² Undoubtedly, what can be said is that our gestures change many times daily; we pose continuously, and our gestures and poses change according to our situation. We also rehearse these actions when alone.³ Before walking out the door, we practice a look in the mirror, a gesture that might be useful later in the day, our workday, and in public appearances. Like a baby looking and being unsure of what to do with her or his hands, with those disconnected elements of the "foreign body," we also practice small scenarios—movements and gestures of power and powerlessness—even though we may not know how these movements and gestures can be used, and in which situations they might be appropriate. At times, "we turn up the volume" of our gestures and poses, or our surroundings become the stage for part of our daily theater.

Much has been written about gestures, and comprehensive research clarifying the subject was undertaken. In a broader sense, everyone would agree with regarding gestures as movements of the body. It becomes more complex where we try to understand what physical, physiological, psychological, social, economic, cultural, or other implications stand behind a specific, stereotypical, conventionalized gesture. We might argue that it is our free will which makes us pose in this or that way.

The theatricality of dramatic gestures was applied to art of previous epochs, and placed on the same level as the sensual painted drama of the Baroque. The modern age, by necessity, had to overcome the powerful, sensual theatricality. As a consequence, these gestures were increasingly replaced by mechanical and reflexive movements, and reduced to small, shortened, stiff, and less significant motions. These small actions, some of the more involuntary body movements that remained in our daily life, is but one aspect on which the artists in the exhibition reflect.

When we first began talking about a possible exhibition between Museum für Gegenwartskunst Basel and Malmö Konsthall, we considered a number of

artists and approaches. We talked about how some artists record, transform, and alter everyday gestures into small, new ones. We talked about "abstract thought," which according to Wolff, "cannot be expressed in the language of gesture," and we wondered if it could. Through these early talks, we encircled three words: *theater*, *representation*, and *gestures*, namely, the importance of certain everyday gestures. We also discussed how the latter's small actions can be extremely revealing, and how, from early childhood, we rely on skills of gestural interpretation. Small gestures.

The Jewish Jamaican painter Isaac Mendes Belisario (born 1795, Kingston, Jamaica – died 1849, London, England) was among the first artists of which we thought, due to his interest in recording and describing the social realities of slavery at a pivotal moment in Jamaican history. Working in times of change and rebellion, his images record the cultural responses of the enslaved and emancipated, the economic, materialistic, and cultural interests of the land- and slave-owning elite, and the beauty of a land shaped by the sugar economy. In his most well-known *Sketches of Character, In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation, and Costume of the Negro Population in the Island of Jamaica*, published in collaboration with the lithographer Adolphe Duperly in 1837/38, Belisario depicts the mixed, urban population of Jamaica and its folklore traditions and celebrations through twelve hand-colored lithographs.

Belisario's *Sketches of Character* provides the first detailed visual representation of the celebrated Afro-Jamaican masquerade, or *Jonkonnu* (or John Canoe), of enslaved performers dancing, performing drama, and creating music during the Christmas and New Year holidays. Isaac Mendes Belisario soon became a turning point in our discussions. Our interest could well have been socio-political and post-colonial, or we could have looked at the practice of slavery and the legacy of its economy, still being felt today. As relevant and obvious as this latter subject is, we decided to abandon this track. Instead, we discussed the importance of how Belisario portrayed, documented, and staged the Creolization and theatrical gestures of Jamaican folklore during the mid-eighteen-thirties.⁴

Inspired by Belisario, we turned toward modern gestures. The twenty-first century has seen the introduction of many new tools for self-representation and gestures. Media and access to information have clearly escalated in the last ten to twenty years, and have increasingly become personalized. On diverse social www-platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, etc., we exchange opinions and images of our self, stage ourselves, and present our own private theater of images from our daily life. We show how we would like to be viewed, with whom we would like to be associated, or befriended. These new tools would have been Andy Warhol's wet dream due to their immediate and constantly changing or changeable window to the outside world. Faster than ever, we can be anyone we want, and can create different personas in different media. The created stage, platform, or theater can be seen, more or less, anywhere on the planet. The ways of understanding distance have become distorted and abstract, but on an individual level, our *Little Theatre of Gestures* seems somewhat closer.

We have invited eight artists who deal with theatricality and gestures: within art, daily surroundings, or with gestures of "abstract thought." *Little Theatre of*