

Elena Clare Cuffari

**MEANING WELL:
THE INTERACTIVE ART OF GESTURING**

How do I receive another person's gestures? This question is strange because it calls attention to something I do constantly and automatically. Structurally, it carries an ambiguity between descriptive and normative targets: reflecting on *how* I do something aims to uncover not only the conditions of the action's possibility, but also potential for improvement in my conduct. The normative angle enhances the question's oddity, because presumably receiving another person's gestures is something I do well if I am able to interact competently and even smoothly with other people much of the time. Is there even much doing here, on my part? Any critical focus in such contexts would tend to fall on the gesturing act itself, the activity of the other. Without posing these questions, it is unlikely that I will notice my contributions to a conversation or interaction in "passive" moments of listening, watching, not yet responding. It is unlikely that I will seek to change my manner of being during those times. Furthermore, without reflection on what it is to gesture, inquiries and improvements into my gesture-receiving practice are foreclosed.

In the present work I conceive of gesture reception as an art, and therefore as active and interactive in addition to simply passive. Interlocutors should deliberately attempt to see themselves as artists and to see their own and others' participation in conversation as an

imperfect, interactive, and creative process. Despite assumptions common to philosophy and everyday experience, I do not immediately or perfectly understand the gestures of another.

The imperative to cultivate an art of gesture receiving follows from Merleau-Ponty's metasemantics of human gesturing. Current projects in embodied and social cognitive science and philosophy of mind have integrated much of Merleau-Ponty's work on this subject without directly reckoning the aesthetic and ethical dimensions. If we have in place an adequate theory of the metasemantics of gestural meaning—that is, the intertwining conditions of intercorporeality and idiosyncrasy, of sedimentation and spontaneity, of convention and creativity—we can hear more in Merleau-Ponty's often cited claim that speech is a genuine gesture. Specifically, we can hear how this designation necessarily upsets any easy confidence we have in the idea that understanding the words of another is an obvious, immediate, or complete process. We are then motivated to practice the timely art of improving our reception of gestures by beginning to perceive ourselves perceiving.

Speaking, Gesturing, Linguaging

Gesturing with the hands while speaking, for example in everyday conversations, can be identified and analyzed as a key “part” of *linguaging*, a term employed by Thomas Jensen to signify any “dynamic adaptive behavior” that humans engage in with their whole bodily being in the course of living in constitutive conjunction with natural-

cultural ecologies.¹ Merleau-Ponty's broad sense of gesturing as expressive action that signifies is compatible with many current uses of this term; this is no coincidence since Merleau-Ponty inspires much recent theorizing of the embodied and social nature of human sense-making.² Consequently, speaking and hand gesturing count as languaging, that is, as gesturing in Merleau-Ponty's sense. Some interaction researchers include head and torso movement and gaze in their video analyses; Merleau-Ponty's meditations on gesturing attend to facial expressions, painting, and novel writing. I focus on the consequences of understanding conversational enactments (which may be multimodal) as gesturing.

Speaking *is* gesturing. Speaking is making expressive bodily actions (vocal and manual gesticulations) that are spontaneous and exude excess and style. Speaking performs meaning through enacting or inhabiting sedimented linguistic gestures (words, syntactic forms, conventions). Judith Butler importantly notes, however, that as bodily action—and as human action, that is, imperfect, situated, coauthored, witnessed/experienced by others, and temporally open-ended—“speech is always in some ways out of our control.”³ Merleau-Ponty makes a similar observation: “...there is in all expression—even in linguistic expression—a spontaneity that will not tolerate commands, even those I would like to give myself.”⁴

¹ Thomas Wiben Jensen, “Emotion in Languaging: Languaging as Affective, Adaptive, and Flexible Behavior in Social Interaction,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 1-14, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00720.

² For example, in the work of Evan Thompson *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007); and Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 87.

Yet gesturing, in both narrow and broad senses, is communicative, rational. Gesturing interactively realizes social agency. Expressive action is elicited by and conducted with others. Expressive bodily movement signifies according to the logic of *appropriative disclosure*. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's dialectic of sedimentation and spontaneity, and what he later refers to as the "paradox" of expression, gesture analyst Jürgen Streeck and I use this term to capture the twofold movement at work in the hand gestures people make in everyday workplace interactions.⁵ We posit it as a metasemantic principle for explaining how some conversational hand gestures mean: hands (also body positioning and gaze) select objects and features of a scene for intersubjective attention. The selection is a bodily action and as such is always done in some intentional *manner*, which discloses something to the participants on the scene. Hand gesture disclosing may occur in the manner in which the hands take hold, trace, explore, or manipulate the selected objects and features.

The philosophical upshots of this metasemantic principle include an understanding of meaning production as a complex whole-body and inter-bodily process coauthored by participants and environment. Intentions that range from pre-reflective and practical to explicitly communicative and rational intermingle and take shape as bodies engage in and with intersubjective space. Acknowledging this complex and distributed reality of gestural meaning-making raises questions concerning the locus of responsibility for meanings so made; I will return to this point later.

⁵ Elena Cuffari and Jürgen Streeck, "Taking the World by Hand: How (Some) Hand Gestures Mean," in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christian Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, and Scott Jordan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

As an example of appropriate disclosure at work, consider two car mechanics collaborating to diagnose an issue with a grill. Crouching, bending, and circling the front of the car in question, they set up an intersubjective space of focus and exploration. Running fingers over a surface, gripping a part with a certain hold, or making a precise motion near a region of the car all appropriate features of the scene in a disclosive manner that is meaningful for their project of reaching a shared understanding and plan of what they need to do. Speaking adds another dimension of interbodily engagement. Within the time and space of a conversation the exploratory hand movements are also communicative means, making sense of the immediate materials as well as the purpose and larger plan of what is to be done at work today.⁶

In the present work, I follow Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy of language in which he compares language, and particularly the act of speaking, with painting and literary writing. It is worth considering how participants in whole-body languaging are artists, making interpretive contributions and completions analogous to readers or painting viewers. We then see how the logic of appropriative disclosure applies to speaking as well as hand gesturing, and furthermore, that appropriative disclosure works as the in-common metasemantic principle of gesturing in the broad sense. Thinking of gesture receiving as an art helps us to better understand Merleau-Ponty's notion of "coherent

⁶ For a detailed gestural analysis of this scene, with still shots from video data, see Cuffari and Streeck "Taking the World by Hand."

deformation.”⁷ The idea of appropriative disclosure encourages us to understand creativity in terms of both taking up prior meanings and expressing new ones. Focusing on the creative feats of conversational enactments shifts our attention on art from a perceiver-perceived to a self-other relation. While it follows Merleau-Ponty’s important thinking on intersubjectivity, this is a radical shift because it implies that our relational actions are works of art and, as such, can be cultivated, refined, and rendered more moral. We can then take on questions of this sort: How do we comprehend creativity and newness introduced by the perspective of another?

Merleau-Ponty and the Art of Gesture

We can and should attempt to mediate the immediacy of what we do to each other in languaging.⁸ This requires recognizing my gesturing interlocutor as an *artist*, a sense-maker engaged in expressive bodily action. It requires recognizing that, as gesture-receiver, I am an expressive body engaged in making sense of this particular self-and-other co-creation.

Merleau-Ponty observes the collaborative art of literature, noting how the written word powerfully yet indirectly sets up a world for a reader to enact, based on her own lifetime of experience. In detailing the creative relationship between author, book, and reader, Merleau-Ponty offers a metaphor in which all three conjoin in a consuming flame: “...I start to read a book idly, giving it hardly any thought; and suddenly, a few words move me, the fire catches, my thoughts are ablaze, there is nothing in the book which I can

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 91.

⁸ I am grateful to Hanne de Jaegher for this phrase.

overlook, and the fire feeds off everything I have ever read. *I am receiving and giving in the same gesture.*”⁹ The reader’s reception of the author’s gesture is itself a gesture that completes the author’s.

This example manifests the logic of appropriative disclosure at work not just on the part of the gesturer but fully realized in collaboration with the gesture-receiver. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Sedimented language is the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations without which he could never have begun to read... But speech is the book’s *call to the unprejudiced reader.*”¹⁰ Whether in creative writing or in painting, art, as gestural expression, *speaks* or signifies through interplay of familiar signs inhabited and redeployed from the particular perspective of a sense-making, perceiving body. The intentional stance or bearing of the receiver of this expressive gesture matters; a prejudiced reader may struggle to experience the foreign perspective of the writer, to inhabit her perceptions.

As Merleau-Ponty establishes in a number of texts, the organismic power of perception is never merely a natural phenomenon but at the same time is selective, intentional, and culturally situated; “perception already stylizes.”¹¹ He turns to painting to show how the perceiving and gesturing body at once provides the unifying source of a whole artistic

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 11; emphasis added. For an excellent contemporary discussion of the interactive enaction of narrative experience see Yanna Popova’s *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 13; emphasis added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

tradition and the individual idiosyncrasy of *style* which, through its difference-making, “is what makes all signification possible.”¹²

Consider how the style of a famous painter is identifiable, not as “a certain number of ideas or tics that he can inventory but a manner of formulation that is just as recognizable for others and just as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures.”¹³

What makes a Vermeer “a Vermeer” is the special felt sense that a work shares with other works, a common sense achieved by this painter’s trademark bodily movements. These movements enact meaning as a whole and are essentially unanalyzable to the painter himself and to others. The unique signification of this painter’s way of seeing and gesturing the world speaks to others through a tradition even as it necessarily, in its own way and in order to say anything at all, deviates from that tradition.

Merleau-Ponty thus finds in painting a clear way to pose the “paradoxical enterprise” of expression.¹⁴ He contrasts the mistaken assumption of meaning in classical painting with the problem of meaning recognized in modern painting. The former, “...in order to achieve communication, relies upon the perceptual apparatus considered as a *natural* means of communication between men. *Do we not all have eyes which function the same way?* If the painter has known how to discover sufficient signs of depth or of velvet, will we not all, when we look at the picture, see the same spectacle...?”¹⁵ Modern discourse on art refuses to put full faith in a universal bodily experience and instead wonders

¹² Ibid., 58.

¹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50; emphasis added.

“...how the painter’s intention will be reborn in those who look at his paintings.”¹⁶

Merleau-Ponty cannot reconcile this tension, because it is exactly the condition for communication as such, and it connects speaking with other expressive action. Gesturing makes sense for bodies that are similar in structure and capacity and yet individual in perspective and style. The implications of this claim are profound: we must hear the effort and potential for failure in the too-familiar phrase “*makes sense*.”

Mapping this analysis onto language, Merleau-Ponty insists “it is as essential to language that the logic of its construction never be of a kind that can be put into concepts as it is to truth never to be possessed, but only transparent through the clouded logic of a system of expression which bears the traces of another past and the seeds of another future.”¹⁷

Signification through stylized gesturing *makes meaning*, not through correct correspondence with concepts or facts, but through the paradox of inhabiting established forms in order to break from them, say something new, and arouse attention.¹⁸ “No less than with painting, the essential meaning of the work of art is perceptible at first only as a *coherent deformation* imposed on the visible.”¹⁹ Hence the questions: How do I receive the gestures of another, which *deform* the scene before me? What keeps the deformation coherent? How do I know what I am looking at?

Merleau-Ponty repeatedly observes that we recognize a Vermeer as a Vermeer, or a Stendhal as Stendhal. We know the perspective of another as a pervasive whole of feeling

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 37. For further explicit aligning of painting with language, see p. 88.

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

and experience, like a mood or a spell that overtakes us. We make sense of/with this mood from the inside out. Everyday speaking and gesturing are different acts of expression than painting or literary writing in important part because they are not fixed to a canvas or page. They operate on different timescales and often are irrecoverable. But if Merleau-Ponty is right that speaking and gesturing signify as these more lasting artworks do, that is, in terms of a dialectical tension between style and established form that opens on perception, then the differences of modality and process simply indicate a pressing need for trained and mindful reception. As with a beloved painter or author, to know someone well is to be familiar with the spell she casts, to have practice and patience engaging with her style until we can cohere with the deformations her gestures make.²⁰ This is by nature an endless task that witnesses countless moments of failure or struggle.

Language and Emotional Experience

Recall this frequently cited passage from *The Phenomenology of Perception*:

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account... I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read the anger in it. The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself.²¹

The passage above comes a page after Merleau-Ponty pronounces “the spoken word is a gesture”: “Thought is no ‘internal’ thing, and does not exist independently of the world

²⁰ As Merleau-Ponty writes, “...in the case of works that one likes to see or read again, the disorder is always another order.” Ibid., 63.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 214.

and of words... Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted... as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture... *The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way the gesture contains its.*²² Gesture is anger itself. Gesture is what my body does when I think, talk, feel, or get mad. Gesture contains meaning in a certain way. What is that way?

Gesturing in Merleau-Ponty's broad sense *is* enacting a spontaneity-sedimentation dialectic; in this process thought and expression are brought about in one achievement against a given background or context.²³ Speaking, writing, painting, and other expressive actions "contain" their meaning as living bodily inhabiting (appropriating) of the materials of the moment. This taking-up shifts the ecology. A new perspective dulls or enlivens the scene. At this point in the text, to exemplify the way gesture as bodily expression "contains" its meaning, Merleau-Ponty offers the anger example mentioned above, which he introduces by saying again, "The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world."²⁴

When someone around me slams a door, this does not set off a process of decoding such as: "the door slamming is a sign that she is angry." Rather, I experience her anger along with her action. The door slamming means a world of abrupt noise and force, of closure, of walls shaking and then falling stone cold and quiet. A world where we are not talking

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 213; emphasis added.

²³ David McNeill also finds this dialectic informative in analyzing hand gesture meaning, yet he takes it as inspiration for a categorical distinction between gesture and speech; I do not read this to be Merleau-Ponty's intention. See *Hand and Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992) and *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 214.

now, not looking at each other. Bodily action is expressive and it is so in what some philosophers describe as a “direct” way.²⁵ This description implies an other who receives the gesture, someone who directly “gets the message” without having to pass through a sign or symbol. Bodily acting, whether it is making a face, slamming a door, yelling, or painting, is immediately perceivable and intersubjectively available to experience.

Yet, there is more to understand in these famous passages on expressive bodily action. Before you can blink (it often feels) a door has been slammed. One response led to another, a conversation became an argument, and *this* world rather than that one came forth. It is not enough to say that I have perceived the anger itself as soon as I perceived the gesture. I *feel* the anger, without deciding to. What does this say about me as gesture receiver? What does it say about the door slammer?

Butler’s analysis of threat is useful: “Although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language, a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force.”²⁶ She continues, “The threat prefigures or, indeed, promises a bodily act, and yet is already a bodily act, thus establishing in its very gesture the contours of the act to come.”²⁷ Butler notes that threats have immediate illocutionary power, but that as speech acts they are vulnerable to failure, and as bodily acts they take effect (or fail to take effect) beyond the intention or control of the speaker. She describes the implicit

²⁵ See, for example, Shaun Gallagher, “Intersubjectivity in Perception,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 41, no. 2 (2008): 163-78; and Joel Krueger and Soren Overgaard, “Seeing Subjectivity: Defending a Perceptual Account of Other Minds,” *ProtoSociology (Online)* 47 (2012): 239-62.

²⁶ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

power that the *threatened* person, the receiver of the threat, has "...to expose the body of the one who speaks, to counter the act with an act that exposes the what is most unknown to the ones who deliver the threat... the question of what they will do, in a bodily sense, given what they have already done, bodily, in speaking as they have."²⁸ To speak is always already to do something—bodily, emotionally, cognitively, existentially—to someone else, and at the same moment to leave myself open to a response not only to what I have said but also to what I have done. As receiver of a speaking gesture, I am always already affected, but for Butler this means first and foremost that I am called into being as a languaging agent, uniquely enabled to speak from the position of the affected, to name more accurately than the speaker (or door slammer) herself what her gesture did.

When it comes to the acts of a familiar person (a loved one, cohabitant, colleague) it can be easy to think I know everything I need to "read" and receive that gesture. Such a perspective may miss the active, dynamic, and collaborative nature of gesture receiving. Imagine that someone in my house has the habit of saying "goddamnit" in reaction to everyday negative experiences. How might I, as a family member/codweller, receive such a gesture? While varying with circumstance, plausible options include: 1. being bothered (or not) by this habit or by some of its instances; 2. ignoring it; 3. laughing at it; 4. taking it personally; 5. taking it to affect the common mood of the house; 6. taking it as an invitation to react in a similar manner. I might say or think "that's just his way," or I might rankle at the negativity. I might presume anger or at least annoyance on the part of the swearer.

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

As Jensen argues, once it is recognized that languaging is a culturally constrained whole-body activity, it follows that language is “inherently affective.”²⁹ If “...emotions are seen, not as individual inner states, but as processes of organism-environment interaction, and given that languaging is seen, not as an abstract semiotic system, but as dynamic adaptive behavior, emotion is to be seen as an intrinsic part of languaging itself.”³⁰ Doing something in language is doing something *to* as well as with another. If linguistic acts deploy symbols that constrain and coordinate participants in an interaction system, what they are coordinating is (at least also) experience and emotional reaction.

Another upshot of Jensen’s argument is that languaging is an affective bodily act (an inter-bodily act, but bodily nonetheless). As research indicates, swearing lessens pain.³¹ I could receive a cohabitant’s swearing not *simply* as a social (other-oriented) expression—although it is never not this—but also as a physical one, as a release of uncomfortable energy or as part of a whole-body sense-making process that seeks a more adaptive fit with the present environment. (Imagine realizing in the very act of swearing at the inconvenience *just how frustrating* it is to be unable to find a certain kitchen tool in a cluttered drawer—and then deciding to organize.)

Recently my partner and I decided to avoid swearing in the presence of our young son. This heightened my sensitivities to his habit of enacting moments of dissatisfaction by pronouncing mild expletives. I found myself bothered by the persistence of this habit.

²⁹ Jensen, “Emotion in Languaging,” 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Richard Stephens and Claudia Umland, “Swearing as a Response to Pain-Effect of Daily Swearing Frequency,” *The Journal of Pain* 12, no. 12 (2011): 1274-81.

Two interpretative stances helped me relate to the habit: first, thinking of swearing as an act of his *body*, and second, realizing the extent to which my own interpretation—reception—completed the gesture’s meaning in a way that drew out more negative characteristics than might have been. Receiving my partner’s cursing as whole-body sense-making (gesturing in a broad sense) attunes me to this body that I know and about which I care very much. After years of friendship and marriage, I know that some emotions and some modes of emotional expression are more comfortable and available to him (as *this body*) than others. A seemingly angry gesture may actually not be angry at all, but lonely, or overwhelmed. This is just the sort of knowledge that is easily forgotten in the heat of the moment, however, and must be mindfully reclaimed in a more artful gesture receiving.

In talking together about the issue, we discovered that he does not swear when alone with our son, but only when the three of us are all at home. By being his audience, not any audience but *me*, myself on the scene, I am a coauthor to his swearing. He swears *for* me as particular audience, as direct or indirect recipient, as vulnerable being open to reciprocity. As Merleau-Ponty explains, because of our fundamental intercorporeality, and because of the divergent nature of meaning itself, we are passive *and* active in our collaborative sense-making. My predictable grimace, even coming a beat after the fact, in fact solicits the swearing gesture.

It takes time and care to develop curiosity as a way of being active in my passive turn as listener, and humility to realize that I do not know everything that I need to read the

gesture. My partner's bodily act of swearing—the emphasis, the force, the raw frustration and dissatisfaction in it—exceeds his own knowing or planning in speaking. Even as I experience more dimensions of affectivity in the bodily act than he likely intended, I can choose what in this experience to focus on and carry forward in the interaction only by daring to self-consciously participate in the emotional experience of the expression. The gesture need not make me *think* of anger, but it invites me to participate in the anger, and thereby to understand something more of what is happening with my interlocutor. In this case, by being artful in my gesture receiving, I may come to understand that the anger is not (or not just) anger, that the force I register may have more to do with my own emotional situation than the gesturer's "true" meaning, and that my response matters. In attending to this case, I noticed that I act similarly. I express momentary feelings excessively; I gesture more forcefully *at* my partner than I might consciously choose to. We are aiming to stay mindful of the creativity and vulnerability of our gestural enactions; in wanting to bring forth certain worlds rather than others for our son, this was our goal from the start.

Coherent Deformations

Expression takes place on multiple timescales, many of which are quicker than my conscious attention can handle. In conversation I act without deliberate interpreting; I am drawn in before I know it. Spontaneous living in and through stylistic expressive acts is how meaning-making happens; Merleau-Ponty calls language "a magic machine"

because it can transport “the ‘I’ into the other person’s perspective.”⁴⁵ Without this perception-altering, world-altering transformative power, we would not be equipped to experience history, change, or meaning. But transportation and transformation entail vulnerability to confusion and damage. The very act of languaging is, as a bodily act, a manifestation of *habit* and *position*. It is not necessarily easy to adapt my self-familiar way of gesturing or to incorporate another’s style.

As multiple perspectives “encroach” upon each other in “intersubjective speech,” there is reversibility and sharing, but also trespass.⁴⁶ This is an important consequence of the bodily nature of our participation in gesture signification. The turn-taking structure of conversation distributes passive and active roles; and, as Merleau-Ponty points out, even in the passive role of listener one reacts and actively follows along.⁴⁷ To be affected by the words of another, to be drawn into that reversible, vulnerable place of dialogue, I already know *something* of what he is saying. This knowledge is not (simply) propositional or conceptual. The speaker, in his expressive gesturing, inhabits a form that I have heard, seen, or felt before, that I can put on, too, when my turn comes. But it will look different on me, and I will look out differently from under its brim.

In conversation I am encroached upon. This means that I can be invaded. My borders can be crossed. I can *feel* what you are saying, what you are *doing*. I have to deal with it—either incorporate it or push it away. I necessarily respond. We are participating in speech together. We are midwives to the birth of meaning out of divergence in our perspectives

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 143-44.

as much as out of the commonalities between us. Birth is messy, smelly. There are residues and tears, not all of which get stitched up. The reversibility of gesture is ultimately an openness that exceeds our powers to close it.

Care is needed. A spontaneous act is not, simply by virtue of its unbidden upsurge, a window into another's mind; nor is it necessarily opaque just because unexpected. I might not know the language you speak but I may understand in an instant what you want to happen as a result of your speaking in it, in this moment. On the contrary, a communicative act is not, simply by virtue of its taking up of familiar forms, guaranteed to make comfortable or appropriate sense to another.

In one of Claudia Rankine's works of prose poetry in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, she writes of a friend who greets the narrator's tardy arrival with the words "You are late, you nappy-headed ho."⁴⁸ Rankine's poem continues, registering the pain of sudden "incoherence" between friends:

...What did you say? you ask, though you have heard every word. This person has never before referred to you like this in your presence, never before code-switched in this manner. What did you say? She doesn't, perhaps physically cannot, repeat what she has just said. Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language"...Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don

⁴⁸ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2014), 41-42.

Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. You don't know. You don't know what she means..."⁴⁹

Rankine goes on to express (in the deliberate, encroaching intimacy of the second person), you do not care how you are expected to respond (how she *meant for you to* respond). The incoherence is a violent betrayal: "You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture."⁵⁰ This poetry shows that familiar phrases in familiar mouths can come too close and do unwanted damage. Presumably that wasn't the "speaker's intention" (although sometimes it may well be). The cut is experienced by both; *that* meaning is shared. The "original" meaning of the gesture is unclear, perhaps now even to the gesturer herself.

In recasting gesturing and gesture-receiving as artistic endeavors, I do not want to imply that they are pleasant—only that this stance opens up ethical dimensions and ameliorative possibilities. Acknowledging that interpretation is perpetual and imperfect, and that intentions are coauthored and elicited, makes it harder to (simply or exclusively) blame the other or to let myself off the hook. Ideally, it invites me to be more careful and more caring. At the same time, a heightened awareness of mutual bodily being and vulnerability, common sensitivity as sharers/perceivers of the unfolding scene, provides criteria for how to take care and take responsibility. In Merleau-Ponty's work one finds optimism regarding intercorporeality as the solution to its own problem, as when he

⁴⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

writes of “the body’s power to bridge diversity.”⁵¹ Today I think we can make best use of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor of the language-user as artist to maintain space and curiosity about the distances we have not yet bridged. As Jennifer McWeeny writes in her ethical analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology: “though we are all flesh, we are not all in the same boat.”⁵²

Meaning Well

The artistic model of gesture emphasizes self-awareness about my gesturing and receiving acts as creative, coauthored, and vulnerable. Taking a stance towards languaging as artistic creation implies recognition and responsibility for languaging acts as world-bringing acts, and it requires attitudes of curiosity, charity, and experimentation.

This model does not imply escape into quietude or rarefication, and it should be readily applicable. For example, Donald Trump does not take an artistic stance towards languaging and does not practice languaging as an artist. As an ideologue, he takes the world as fixed, and he believes that the meaning of his speech acts begins and ends with him.⁵³ I might place the friend in Rankine’s poem on the opposite end of the spectrum. In casually and surprisingly employing a slur to address the poem’s narrator, the friend acts carelessly, and seems outrun by the meaning of her gesture. Yet, as I argued above following Merleau-Ponty and Butler, no one has perfect control over her expressive actions. All of us have moments of extremes: we can be dictators with our words, and we

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 82.

⁵² Jennifer McWeeny, “Topographies of Flesh: Women, Nonhuman Animals, and the Embodiment of Connection and Difference,” *Hypatia* 29, no. 2 (2014): 269-86, p. 277.

⁵³ Thanks to George Foulas for this example.

can be loose canons. The moment that affords greater artistic potential may indeed be the moment of receiving and response.

Recall again the effect of the gesture in Rankine's poem: both women experience pain. The world brought forth in the unfortunate utterance is something both would reject. The poem does not condemn the friend but presents her as stunned by and physically struggling with the distaste of her own words. In placing this instance as one among many others experienced throughout the book of poetry, Rankine signals that these are *not* the friend's "own" words. Racist gestures signify by inhabiting racist forms (stereotypes, reasoning, vocabulary) that in any particular moment precede and exceed the gesturer. This hardly makes it "okay" to use them, but, on the model of the artist, the sin of the racist gesture comes not in breaking a social rule (being "politically incorrect") but in enacting a hateful and unwanted world. The art of receiving an ugly gesture lies in showing that such a world is unwanted and another is to be preferred.

Rankine's poetic creation *responds* to the heavy rotation of racist signifiers that dominate daily encounters. Her second-person narration throughout *Citizen* collapses the distinction between narrator and reader. She thus directly *places* the reader in a racist world, which is already all of ours, and shows well that nobody wants to live there. In a poem at the start of the book the narrator/reader—"you"—can barely get out of bed in the morning; it is as if "you" are buried by an avalanche of small and unintentionally hurtful gestures. Rankine's reception of racist gestures takes the form of artistic refusal to be the (only) one who has to inhabit the world they perpetuate.

Consider as another positive artist model the “autopoetic aesthetic” that Jennifer Hall identifies in a range of works of interactive art, in which observers are always participants and thus complicit in the emergence of a work’s (complex and non-singular) intention.⁵⁴ Hall discusses works like Simon Penny’s “Petit Mal,” an “anti-robot” made of two wheels, a counterbalance, and a chaotic motion generator for a heart that spends all of its time trying to stay upright and, paradoxically, seeking out physical obstacles “that may make this work of staying upright more difficult.”⁵⁵ To *see* this work of art is necessarily to get swept up in its wild dance of approaching and reacting to unpredictable entities (like museum visitors). Hall reads this and other hybrid-system-creating, process-driven art works to show that “experience and expression cannot be neatly separated.”⁵⁶ I appreciate Hall’s choice of terms when she writes,

...the ‘interactive gesture’ of the interactant...relies upon the embodied patterns of action and reaction...the interactive aesthetic relies less on what an artwork looks like and more on the phenomenological embodied patterns of action and reaction the artwork stimulates between the viewer and [work of art]. By such means, experience becomes physically accessible for contemplation and enables us to perceive ourselves perceiving.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jennifer Hall, “An Autopoetic Aesthetic in Interactive Art,” in *Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind: Beyond Art Theory and the Cartesian Mind-Body Dichotomy*, ed. Alfonsina Scarinzi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 304.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

Perceiving myself perceiving is a mantra for the art of gesture-receiving. In detailing my own experiences receiving my partner's swearing gestures, an analysis of an interaction in Rankine's poem, and models of the deliberate production of aesthetic experience through interaction (in *Citizen* and "Petit Mal"), I attempt to articulate this extension of Merleau-Ponty's metaphor of artist.

Merleau-Ponty invites a reframing of our daily sense-making and communicative activities as forms of art. We sing the world. We speak like painters paint, addressing the present (or future) by referring to centuries of tradition that enable the current expression. Were it not for his rich philosophy of intersubjectivity, this turn to the aesthetic could lead to a loss of connection or a worry of solipsism. But the lessons of embodied intersubjectivity invite a shift from questions of meaning to those of *meaning well*. In speaking, which is to say in gesturing, I transgress bodily boundaries and effect the course of experience for another. How am I to be responsible for that influence? This is a question to meditate on rather than answer quickly, for in gesturing I dwell in forms and patterns that exceed my momentary intentions, even as they may be habits that I have pre-reflectively incorporated and enacted spontaneously. I am inspired and limited what is at hand, by what my hands are used to, by phrases that fill the ether and spill out of my lips unbidden. The same is true for others. Practicing gesture as an interactive art requires mindful attention to, curiosity in, and caring for these conditions.

Elena Clare Cuffari

ecuffari@worchester.edu

Abstract

Receiving another person's gestures is an aesthetic production and an ethical pursuit. Cuffari finds support for this claim in Merleau-Ponty's sustained comparisons between speaking, writing, and painting and in his concepts of reversibility and encroachment in *The Prose of the World*. She considers complex instances of gesture reception in interactions occurring in family life, poetic response to racist speech, and a robotic art exhibition. Gestures signify according to a logic of appropriative disclosure, wherein gesturing bodies select and stylize features of shared space and history in an effort to say something new. Gesture receivers complete acts of meaning making by confronting and co-inhabiting the coherent deformations of another's stylized and expressive action. Cuffari calls for efforts to perceive ourselves perceiving as a conscious practice of artistic stance towards conversational meaning co-construction.