



HAND, GESTURE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

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Hand, Gesture, and the Unconscious

In this essay, I will explore three key words: hand, gesture, and the unconscious, and examine the interplay between them. I will define each word and examine the role they have played in scientific thought, philosophical debate, and the creative arts; culminating in an understanding of how they are perceived in our cultural milieu and how their synergy influences my own creative practice.

From an anatomical perspective, the human hand can be defined as a prehensile appendage, located at the distal end of the forearm; consisting of an opposable thumb, four fingers, palm, and wrist (Collins, 2018, pp. 888; BMA, 2009, pp. 267). The plasticity of this pentadactyl limb, enables it to be used with exacting precision; sculpting and morphing all it touches, as we perpetually explore the three dimensionality of our surrounding macrocosm (Gebauer, 2019, pp. 187). It is through this agility and tactility, that we can express our creative power and give form to our thoughts.

Hands are the embodiment of what it means to be human and have played a significant role in the creative development of every civilization. Culturally, they are the foundation for a whole plethora of myths, superstitions, and folklore (Alpenfels, 1955, pp. 4). The word '*hand*', an old English word of Germanic origin, has a multifaceted presence in the English language and is used in numerous collocations and idioms, the meanings of which often evoke a sense of control, power, or change (Gebauer, 2019, pp. 187; Woodford, 2020). Hands act as both an article of social attention and an instrument of social interaction, conveying ritual codes and nuances of unspoken meaning through gesture. Hand and finger adornments (such as rings, fingernails, and tattoos) divulge intimate and often complex messages of personal identity and societal attitudes (Wilson, 1998, pp. 147). Hands communicate with an expressive silence - the clasped hands of lovers, the comforting touch of a friend and the raised hands of surrender; their meanings transcending all barriers (Ronnberg and Martin, 2010, pp. 380). An example of this expressiveness can be seen in the 3500-year-old clasping hands of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten and his queen Nefertiti (figure 1). Here, their hands are eternally clasped in a loving embrace, the informality of which resists the stiff, rather

stylised art of the time. Transcending the epochs, the hands continue to evoke feelings of affection and tenderness.



Figure 1: The hands of the Akhenaten and Nefertiti (1539 – 1295 B.C.E)

The sculptor Auguste Rodin was fascinated by hands, modelling over a thousand of them during his lifetime, trying to capture the expressive potential of a fleeting gesture (Ruiz-Gómez, 2006, pp.103). His ability to ensnare emotion is beautifully illustrated in figure 2 below, where the anguish expressed by the hand is palpable. It is the very antithesis of Akhenaten and Nefertiti's tender touch.

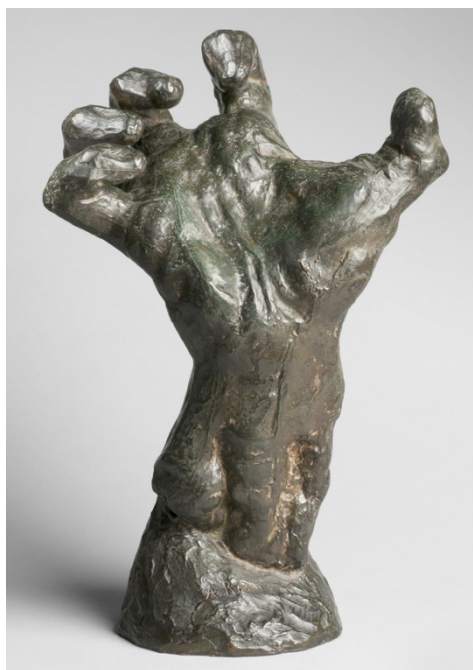


Figure 2: *The Clenched Hand* by Auguste Rodin (1885)

The human hand has been an object of fascination since the birth of human consciousness and has sparked much philosophical debate. The Greek mathematician Anaxagoras (5th century B.C.E) was reputedly the first western philosopher to elucidate the meaning of hands, postulating that human intelligence was a consequence of our articulate manus. A century later, the Greek polymath Aristotle contemplated the versatility of the hand and argued against Anaxagoras' idea - stating that the hand of man was a signifier of our intellect, not its source. To him, man had a starring role in the divine's master plan, which could not be achieved without hands. The Greek physician Aelius Galenus (2nd century C.E.), agreed with Aristotle's view, believing humans to be divine animals, and therefore hands were bestowed upon us by nature as instruments of our intelligence. To Galenus, Anaxagoras' view was contrary to nature's grand scheme (Gebauer, 2019, pp. 185; Russo, 2017, pp. 100; Maurette, 2018). Amid this early debate, runs the belief that hands were a conduit of our sovereignty, to be used as an instrument to govern and manipulate nature to our advantage.

During the anatomical revolution of the Renaissance, attention was focused on the hand's physiological complexity, with the dialogue between the coeval hand of the anatomist, and the inanimate hand of the corpse taking centre stage of a new epistemology. Andreas Vesalius, a 16th century anatomist, shared Galenus' belief that humans had hands because of their intelligence. To him, hands were the quintessential implement of human agency representing the very mechanism of Renaissance culture. He placed special importance on their dissection, believing that the hand's intricate anatomy disclosed God's master plan. (Maurette, 2018). Hand dissection is a meticulous craft, the culmination of specialist knowledge and unsurpassed dexterity, the ultimate demonstration of the skill our bequeathed hands could achieve.

The debate travelled full circle, back in favour of Anaxagoras' original idea in 1859, when Charles Darwin published his book '*On the origin of the species*'. Applying his theory of natural selection, Darwin demonstrated that it was indeed the environment which influenced the development of the hand's structure. A theorem ratified through contemporary investigation, leading to the current perspective of the hand playing a pivotal role in the

evolution of human cognition (Pallasmaa, 2009, pp. 33; Wilson, 1998, pp.291). Although no longer considered a manifestation of the divine, the hand can still be deemed an extraordinary instrument, given its ability to gesticulate our unconscious thoughts and manifest tangible objects from formless ideas. The residue of which, leaves our personal imprint on the world.

The term '*gesture*' can be defined as the movement of the hands, head, or body to convey knowledge or accentuate an idea or emotion, particularly during speaking. Gestures are a ubiquitous multifunctional phenomenon, occurring throughout our daily lives; a non-verbal vehicle through which we can express our ethos to our peers. Originally deriving from the Latin root '*gerere*' meaning 'to bear' or 'to carry', its earliest use in the English language was in reference to the deliberate way the physical body was employed during rhetorical delivery (Collins, 2018, pp. 819; Kendon, 1981, pp. 153; Stam and Ishino, 2011, pp. 3). In contemporary society, gestures are viewed as active participants in an imagery-language dialect, giving physical form to a speaker's verbal expression- both augmenting the dialogue, and providing an insight into the genesis of their thoughts (McNeill, 2007, pp. 4; Goldin-Meadow, 2010, pp. 51). Gestures allow the conveyance of complex spatial relationships, often by virtue of the silent skeletal outlines the hand produces in the space around it.

Gesture is not always used during discourse, but when it is, its role and richness will vary depending upon the dialogue and the ethnicity of the participants (Napier, 1993, pp. 145). The idiosyncratic nature of gesture, its mechanism, and its importance in human articulation, has resulted in much contemporary research, but there was no pellucid way of classifying its representational function in a conversation until Kendon (1982) postulated the classification of gesture into four categories: gesticulation, emblem, pantomime, and sign language, according to whether dialogue was present or absent (Kendon, 1997, pp. 114; Novack and Goldin-Meadow, 2017, pp. 653). This classification system was further developed by McNeill (2007), who arranged the types sequentially along an incremental spectrum, which he termed Kendon's continuum (figure 3) (McNeill, 2007, pp. 7).

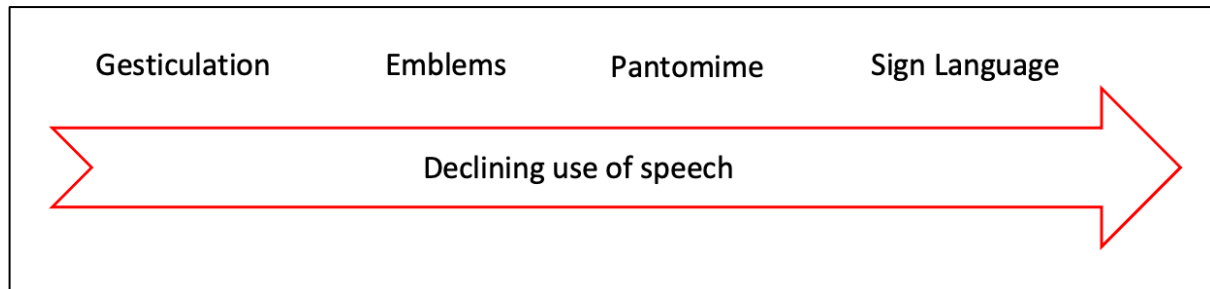


Figure 3: *Kendon's Continuum* based on McNeill, 2007, pp. 7

In the continuum, gesticulation refers to the spontaneous hand movements that frequently accompany speech, often occurring during the conveyance of new or focused information. This type of gesture can serve a dual purpose of adding details that are not present in the dialogue and stressing the information already in place. Gesticulation can be further divided into four categories: Iconics (which express images of actual objects), metaphorics (used to express abstract images), beats (used to emphasise important words and keep the rhythm of the speech) and deixis (non-representational pointing movements) (Stam and Ishino, 2011, pp. 4-5). The second gesture on the continuum are Emblems, which are culturally learnt gestures, such as the middle finger sign, or the 'V' sign. They are used in specific contexts and can be understood immediately. Pantomime is the third type, and includes gestures that convey a silent narrative, such as during a game of charades. They can depict actions, objects, or portray an entire story, without discourse. Lastly, at the opposite end of the continuum, is sign language. These are lexical gestures that relate to words, such as those used in British Sign Language. They contain their own linguistic structure and grammatical patterns and require no accompanying speech. (McNeill, 2007, pp. 5; Stam and Ishino, 2011, pp. 4-5). Up to this point, I have considered gesture as a physical manifestation, relating to movements of the human body, but this is only one aspect of this polysemous entity.

An alternative notion of gesture was created in 1972, by the French art historian Margit Rowell, through her attempt to analyse work produced in the mid 20th century under the abstract genre of 'action paintings' (Hetrick, 2013, pp. 263). These paintings are created through a process of brushing, splashing, dripping, and smearing paint onto the canvas.

Rowell reasoned that when viewing these works, gesture should be considered separately from formal marks (e.g., drips, splatters, and brush strokes) as the latter is a voluntary aesthetic technique of communication in contrast to gesture, which is more abstract and derives from an internal dialogue. To her, the momentum of gesture continues long after these marks have been completed (Hetrick, 2013, pp. 264). This is highlighted by Henri Michaux's work *Movement* (figure 3, below), where the physical strokes of the pen on the paper are an outward expression of the artist's inner latent movement. They demonstrate a continuing gyre between the artist's internal gestures and external strokes (Hetrick, 2013, pp. 269). Here the hand acts as a conduit, a means by which the artist can manifest these gesturers.



Figure 4: *Movement* by Henri Michaux (1950-51)

The unconscious can be characterized as the part of the mind pertaining to our impulses and instincts, things not available for direct introspection (Collins, 2018, pp. 2142). Speculation on the nature of human unconscious has sparked much debate, but it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that Sigmund Freud became the first to realise its importance and investigate it scientifically, eventually leading to his theory of psychoanalysis (Schnier, 1953, pp. 67). Freud postulated that our unconscious thoughts were at one time conscious, but as their nature contradicted what was deemed socially acceptable (e.g., sexual, or aggressive desires), they became repressed and subjected to the deep repository of our unconscious. However, these thoughts did not always linger there, and could reappear disguised in symbolic form, through thoughts, dreams, and art (Lacewing and Gipps, 2019, pp. 474; Schnier, 1953, pp. 68). Freud thought of the unconscious as a distinct primal entity, which fed upon the energy and information of the extra corporeal world. To him, the unconscious didn't just contain forgotten details, but also knowledge that was permanently excluded from conscious recall (Harle, 2010, pp. 312). Current research in cognitive science has confirmed this to be true, as certain cognitive processes cannot be brought into the conscious realm. It has also shown that our psyche is an integrated model; a product of the coexistence between the continued stream of unconscious mental events, and the conscious leaps of intentional thought and emotion (Tauber, 2014, pp.233-4). It is the connection between these two processes that culminates in our insight and creative expression.

Artistic creativity is a dynamic internal process, occurring at the threshold our consciousness; it has been the nexus of human activity since the dawn of man. Conscious thought is adept at the systematic processing of information, but it is in our unconscious, where this information is incubated and conjoined in unusual ways, creating bursts of insight that eventually ascend back into our consciousness. Recent research has shown that the creative process can be hindered by conscious thought, and insight is more likely to occur when our conscious mind is distracted in some way (Siegler, 2000, pp. 79; Zhong *et al.*, 2008, pp. 913). Releasing conscious thought was key to early Surrealist artists, as it allowed them to liberate the creative potential of their unconscious, juxtaposing it with mundane reality (Oscooyee *et al.*, 2011, pp.413). It was their aim to stimulate the viewer's imagination and expose them to the domain of the intangible.

The Surrealist sculptor and painter Max Ernst was fascinated by this hidden inner realm, and experimented with the rubbing technique of frottage, as a way of accessing his unconscious anima. He would select an interesting material or surface, overlay it with paper, and catch an impression of its texture by rubbing the surface of the paper with a pencil. To Ernst, this method provided a creative stimulus which allowed him to generate new, unrelated entities that were linked to the original source-only by the barest of traces (figure 5). What emerged from his unconstrained play, were images reminiscent of the scientific illustrations from the age of enlightenment (Clarke, 1996, pp. 172). These images symbolise the enigma of the creative process, where an idea conceived in our unconscious is formulated into internal gestures, before being expressed by the hand in a tangible way.

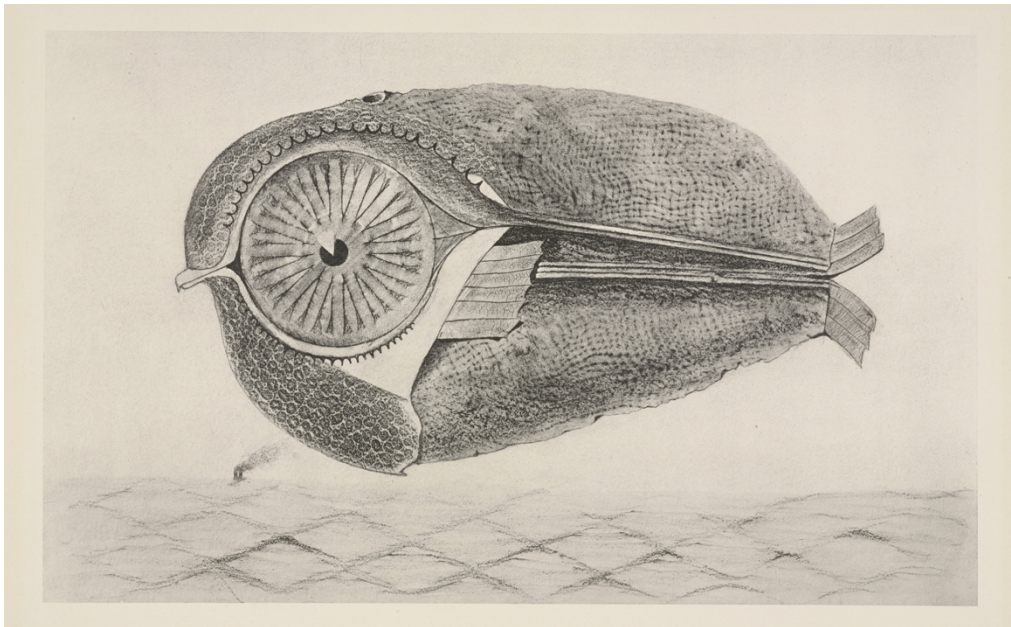


Figure 5: *The Fugitive (L'Évadé)* by Max Ernst (1926)

In conclusion, there is a deep synergy between the unconscious, gesture, and hand. Each reflects our internal barometer and can be used to transpose our visceral emotions into the external world. For me, this triad of words encapsulates the essence of my practice – my aesthetic intention springs from my unconscious, which I then interpret through the relationship of hands and gesture, into a perceivable form. Underlying this trinity is the human brain and its desire to comprehend the everchanging reality around it. Creative expression is initiated under its guidance, and art is ultimately a product of its activity.

The impact of aesthetic experiences on the human brain, causes enhanced connectivity amongst its neural networks, particularly in those involved in perception and pleasure, the interplay of which produces a unique adventure for each of us (Magsamen, 2019, pp. 3). Considering this, a future research proposal would be to investigate further the impact that creative expression has on our brain and how we perceive and understand the works of art we view. This would touch on the newly emerging field of neuroaesthetics (the neural basis of how we perceive art) and, ultimately, how art-based solutions can be used in a practical way to improve our thoughts, emotions, and wellbeing.

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Figures:

Cover photo: *Jointed hands*

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Figure 1: **Burzcott, J.** (2015) *The hands of the Akhenaten and Nefertiti (1539 – 1295 B.C.E)* [Sandstone].

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Figure 2: **Rodin, A.** (1885) *The Clenched Hand* [Bronze]

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Figure 3: **McNeill, D.** (2007) *Gesture & thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Figure 4: **Michaux, H.** (1950-51) *Movement* [Ink on paper]

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Figure 5: **Ernst, M.** (1926) *The Fugitive (L'Évadé)* from *Natural History (Histoire Naturelle)* [Graphite on paper]

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