

## **LOUDER THAN WORDS**

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I thought to examine non-verbal communication by looking at body language and facial expression. So I checked out, bought, borrowed all sorts of tomes with such edifying comments as: “Beauty is a governor to keep the species on course. ... Men cared more about looks, women about prowess. Teachers assume the good looking are more intelligent. Women cry oftener and longer than men. When we shrug our shoulders, we raise our eyebrows.” Or such fascinating topics as : “splitting the gesture space,” “rotation is a frequent gestural metaphor for trying.” Trying, indeed!

Actually there was a book on gestures that was fairly interesting. It examined the do's and taboos of body language around the world. Queen Elizabeth uses her purse to send some twenty different signals to her staff. If she shifts her handbag from her right arm to her left, it is a signal that she wishes to be rescued from the situation. Or if you suddenly come upon a strange woman in her bath, A Mohammedan woman would cover her face, a Laotian woman would cover her breasts, a Chinese woman (before the Revolution) would cover her feet. In Sumatra, the woman would cover her knees; in Samoa, her navel. In the Western World, she would cover her breasts with one hand and her genitals with the other.

Americans wave goodbye with the whole forearm, semiphore style, where Italians or Greeks wave with the palm up, curling the fingers back and forth. Most Americans interpret this as “come here.” Or take poor President Nixon on his goodwill tour of Latin America; he stepped off the plane and flashed the “A-OK” sign to the crowd. They responded by booing. What Nixon had signaled was the gesture equivalent for (PROFANITY ALERT/ READ MY LIPS) “You asshole.” A Frenchman would read that gesture as meaning “zero.” In Japan, the thumb and forefinger making a circle is used as a symbol for money. Or take the V for victory sign. Turn the palm and fingers to face inward it means “up yours.” President Bush, the father, made that error in Australia and an alert news photographer captured his gaffe for that day's late editions. As Merv

Griffin explained when hearing this, it's like saying "up yours, and one for your mother too!"

Then the anthropologists get into the act. One explained that when we cross our fingers to signify protection, okay, good, we are using a gesture originally meant to hide the sign of the cross from unwelcome eyes. Another source talked about kissing as a "relic gesture," passed down to us from the time when mothers would pass food, mouth to mouth, to their infants. Then it went on ad infinitum: Mothers kiss their children's bruises to make them better, tennis stars kiss their trophies, and on and on. I mean.... Boring!

Carl Sandburg had a nominee for the eleventh commandment: thou shalt not commit nincompoopery. To examine these tomes further would have violated that code. I have a nominee for the eighth deadly sin: bombast, pomposity, academic claptrap, the deadly habit of pretension, to pump up the trivial and obvious, hoping to mask the lack of meaning or significance with bloated ponderous prose.

So much for body language. So much for facial expression. So what did that leave me? Everything! Rather than leave myself in the hands of the faux scientists, the would be experts, those crushing bores, I had only to turn the mental kaleidoscope to that wordless powerful communicator: Art. And to the way it insinuates itself into our very souls by the avenue of the senses. I realized that I had been doing research into this means of communication most of my life, and adoring every minute of it.

It is said that the act of writing is motivated by the desire to preserve. At the risk of presenting a rendition of "These are a few of my favorite things," I will offer a sampler from all of the arts, even the unexpected ones. This will be inevitably my sampler - Well, just think of a sampler to begin. The tiny painstaking stitches, the sentimental mottoes, the choice of colors, the mistakes picked out but leaving telltale signs, the proud signatures of those young workers in thread. There is a being communicated in this work, there are hours by lamplight, instruction (patient and otherwise) by elders. These are the stitches of *rites de passage*, the record of growing up. Little hands attempting great works. Small wonder they are treasures.

We are said to respond to stimuli by kinetic reactions (large muscle -we shield our faces from something hurled at us) or kinesthetic reactions (small muscle, tension/relaxation, emotional) responses. If a sampler elicits a kinesthetic response, Picasso evoked in me a kinetic response. Let me explain. The Art Institute of Chicago mounted a comprehensive retrospective of his paintings in the 1950's, and my college roommates and I went down to see it. We began with the blues and pinks and mountebanks, went on the great gray amazon women so solid as to seem cast in stone, followed by skewed guitars and fruits in brilliant colors, after which came all the distorted women in garish hues - their lidless eyes, unblinking in all the wrong places, their twisted anatomies, bulging and dislocated, succeeded by screaming horses and naked light bulbs and ... I was sick! nauseous, vertigo, out of balance, as though the process of viewing his work was transforming me into one of his contorted portraits. I fled, absolutely certain that I did not like his work and equally certain of its power.

If art may be said to be a selection of significant details, Picasso's combinations of shape and color certainly proved the point. He must have known that primitive languages first develop words for black and white, then add red, then yellow and green. He may have known that ancient cultures (Egyptian, Indian, Chinese) used color therapies of many sorts, prescribing colors for various distresses of the body and soul. Color as a silent language works so well that nearly every animal speaks it. Octopuses change color as they change mood. A scared freshwater perch automatically turns pale. We blush. Scientists have known for years that certain colors trigger an emotional response in people. Children will use dark colors to express their sadness when they're painting, bright colors to express happiness. A room painted bubble gum pink (known in hospitals, schools and other institutions as "passive pink") will quiet them if they've gotten obstreperous. Studies have shown that when subjects watched red light, which excites the brain, their hand grip strength increased by 13.5 percent. Another study with hospital patients showed that their tremors lessened when they watched blue light, which calms the brain. As Picasso's work moved from comforting pastels to heavy black outlining for his shapes which emphasized the elemental, the primitive, his use of brilliant color must have been motivated by the urge to alarm and excite. He writes about walking in the

forests of Fontainebleau where he got an overwhelming “indigestion of greenness,” which he felt driven to empty onto a canvas. One critic has discussed Picasso’s portraits in terms of the Andalusian notion of *miranda fuerte*, or “strong gazing.” *Miranda fuerte* is a way of dominating others, and Picasso, notorious for his need to control people, used the face-forward pose almost solely in self-portraits. In portraits, his subjects gaze off to the side as if unable to tolerate his powerful eyes. And in my initial encounter, I surely responded right on cue, recoiling from the colors and his visions. As he put it: “I want to get to the stage where nobody can tell how a picture of mine is done. What’s the point of that? Simply that I want nothing but emotion to be given off by it.” I have since revised that first opinion of Picasso’s work, having become familiar and thereby having achieved some tolerance for distortion. In short, I have grown accustomed to his non-verbal language, which continues to speak to me, louder than words.

According to the contemporary sculptor, Richard Serra, “Sculpture is another kind of language, with the potential to change how people see and think, to evoke feelings they haven’t had before about containment in space, release in space, movement.” He outraged midtown Manhattan with his immense rusted steel pathway called “Tilted Arc.” For the first time, a commissioned sculpture was taken down. Serra does huge, in contrast to another twentieth century sculptor, Alberto Giacometti. After much early experimentation with surrealism, Giacometti was, ironically, to inhabit a surreal world, moving to Geneva from Paris in 1941 to escape the Nazis. That this oppressive world had its effect may be seen in the diminutive works he produced in the three and a half years in Switzerland. His account of his efforts is of an obsession: “But wanting to create from memory what I had seen, to my terror the sculptures became smaller and smaller, they only had a likeness when very small yet their dimensions revolted me, and tirelessly I began, again and again, to end, several months later, at the same point.” When he returned to Paris in 1945, he brought with him six matchboxes containing the work of four years. By 1947 he would produce a large figure, “Walking Man,” typical of the works with which we associate him. The man is painfully thin. We are aware of the space pressing in upon him; it is alien space, blank space, existential space. The man walks alone in this space, striding hesitantly against, through, despite the space. To see

him was to recall the feeling I had had at the top of Mt. Blanc. Looking out at the vast, hostile, threatening and unending white was to realize that the planet was not hospitable to man, not built for our comfort or survival. I was terrified. It took my breath away. And I could realize why during the war Giacometti could not create anything larger than a thumbnail; and why after the war, the hostile world would press in upon his larger figures to make them filaments. Indeed, the Walking Man seems to say we are specks in the landscape, specks in history, but we walk on nevertheless. He is a testament to striving and to endurance. Louder than words.

Another kind of meditation on space is practiced by the architects. Canterbury Cathedral may be said to be stone aspiring to flight. Before looking at the carving, before the art and the altar where Thomas a Beckett was slain, there was the space itself. If Shakespeare was right and man was a little higher than the beasts and a little lower than the angels, this building sought to soar to heavenly climes. And the power of its aspiration reduced me to tears. I had the same response upon entering the atrium of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao. Somehow, the barrier between art and architecture had been breached and the space itself expressed with stunning clarity, vitality and beauty. It is a secular cathedral, using glass and titanium and plaster rather than stone. As the noted architect, Philip Johnson put it in the videotaped record of his entrance into the atrium, "Architecture is not about words [and then, overcome, wiping his eyes] it's about tears and love."

Dance too is a language all about space and movement. Take Rudolf Nureyev's great leaping entrance in "Swan Lake," when he hangs suspended in midair, full of zest and youth, and time seems to stand still. How can he stay up so long? What has happened to gravity? His power seems greater than the laws of time and space. And he does it yet again, and again. This is the province of genius, known to the likes of Michael Jordan, doing his pirouettes in midair before sinking the ball into the basket. And the only way to describe our response is to quote Gerard Manly Hopkins: "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing." Hopkins was "stirred by a bird." This is a man. And this is marvelous. We are in awe.

Or, as memorably, Natalia Makarova dancing to Prokofieff's "Romeo and Juliet." In her wonderful encounter in the garden with Romeo, she begins to swoon, blissful, unable to contain such joy, finally falling into his arms, rapturously submitting. Later, awakening in the tomb, she finds Romeo dead and with the exact movements of the garden, she begins to swoon, unable to contain the shock, unable to contain her grief. What more profound way to express the inexorable link between love and pain, passion and loss. No need for Shakespeare's speeches. Indeed, the movements become an emblem and act as a substitute for speech.

Julie Taymor, the creator of "The Lion King," calls these emblems "ideographs." These emblems or ideographs help the director and the performer capture and express the kernel of each action without distracting details. Sometimes the emblems were masks that determine character and inform the actors as to the character's idiosyncracies, suggesting a physical type of movement that the actor's body must perform to complete the sculpture. In Taymor's "The Lion King," the character Scar is obviously off-center because he has a scar on the side of his face. He's twisted. He's angular. The mask of Mufasa, who is Scar's polar opposite, is all about symmetry. So the rays of circles that surround his head become his mane. In these masks, Taymor tried to abstract the essence of the character to a word or notion.

Sometimes, the performer himself embodied the emblem. As Taymor played the barren Electra, she developed the gesture of slapping her womb and then reaching out as if in supplication. There are many examples in the theatre. In "Othello," Act III, Scene 3, Iago makes Othello question what he knows, what he thinks, how things seem. He tells Othello to "beware the green-ey'd monster" of jealousy and to look to his wife. And through his insinuations, Iago changes Othello from loving and trusting Desdemona to exclaiming, "I'll tear her all to pieces!" In this critical scene, Jose Ferrer as Iago, opposite Paul Robeson as Othello, found just the ideograph for gaining control over the Moor. He enters with a long leather thong and as the scene progresses, begins to wrap it around his hand, until at the end, the thong is entirely wound and Othello is in his power. Here the nonverbal is as potent as the language.

A banal object that appears to be only what it is metamorphoses into a symbol that resonates with meaning. In the London production of “Jesus Christ Superstar,” the floor of the stage was a grid of what were seemingly large white tiles, grouted with black. During the scene in which Pilate delivers the thirty-nine lashes, he used the long cord from his hand-held microphone to beat at the floor as hard as he could, sound crackling, at which Jesus recoiled as though struck. The stage suddenly lit from below, turned red, square by square, until all thirty-nine squares were red, and Jesus hung limply from the center stage floor mike. The world was bleeding. It was mythic, larger than life. And the suggestion was more harrowing than the real thing.

Actors know the power of the nonverbal and seek to heighten a character through the physical. Alec Guinness stated that he never really got a character until he walked into him. To have seen him, slight and slender, portray Dylan Thomas on Broadway was to believe it. He entered with the heavy, slightly pigeon-toed shuffle of a corpulent, besotted poet at the end of his tether; Guinness had disappeared. Or in his wonderful portrayal of Jacob Marley, in the film “Scrooge,” the way he floated through the doorway, white as winter, unmoored by death, deserted by gravity, held down only by the chains he had forged during his lifetime. Stated in another way, actors use physical expression to reveal a psychological situation. In “True West,” Philip Seymour Hoffman played the drifter-brother who enters the desert world of his writer-brother and destroys it. As the second Act opened, Hoffman was seen bare-chested hanging on the open refrigerator door, arms spread wide to receive the cold. He turned to reach into the refrigerator and then leaned back against it, door still wide open, to pop open a beer can and swig from it. After a slight, dissatisfied pause, he lifted the can and poured it over his head, his mouth wide as the refrigerator door, so as to catch some errant droplets on the fly. There was brutality, savagery, the feral personality - louder than words.

Bill Irwin recently wrote, directed, and starred in the one man play derived from Samuel Beckett’s “Texts for Nothing.” The audience sat on three sides of a brownish, dusty hill. Halfway down on one side was a depression, with a puddle and three or four strands of parched grass. All the way down on the other, a hole of indeterminate depth. There was no curtain. The play began with a pebble rolling down the hill toward the

audience. After a time, a sound of scuffling and a hand struggling to reach the top of the hill and failing. The had reached again and there was an arm, and a hat and ... a man with baggy pants and suspenders, hoisting himself up to see where he had arrived. He was not pleased. He was exhausted. He pulled himself together only to find the hill steeper than he thought and himself rolling down it toward the puddle. A foot out, the heel braking against the earth, and he stopped just short of a wetting. The effort had been extreme, and he took off his hat to fan himself. On his head were three or four strands of hair, remarkably like the grass he sat next to, and which also seemed out of place in this place. Although Irwin had written a marvelous adaptation of Beckett's prose, here was Beckett without the words. Here was the human condition, a man alone, seeking a foothold in an unfriendly universe, falling with as little importance or direction as a pebble. The only distinction (and pathos) was in the extreme effort and the importance the man himself put into the journey. Giacometti's walking man had been transformed into a baggy pants comedian/tragedian.

The film is also a resource for emblems, ideographs. Who can resist Paul Henreid as he lights two cigarettes, in "Now Voyager," and gives Bette Davis one? Now that's romance. Spare me the groping and grunting. They did in "Gone With the Wind," as Clark Gable scooped up Vivien Lee at the bottom of the stairs and strode two steps at a time up into the darkness. Now that's desire. Or wonderful Albert Finney eating faster and faster in "Tom Jones," as his lady friend downed oysters with an open throat, tore at a beef rib, and sucked a drumstick dry. Now that's seduction! All of this, a theatrical sign language that facilitates the layering and counterpointing of subtexts, the refining of a story into its key elements.

And while we're talking about food, Marcel Proust would maintain that it has the power to communicate. A morsel of a "petite madeleine" dipped into his tea, and the floodgates of memory open. And while we're talking about artists, what about chefs being alchemists and transforming dross into the stuff of pure pleasure? Consider the absolute luxury of chocolate. Montezuma's court drank two thousand pitchers of it each day. Recently two psychopharmacologists proposed an explanation for why it is such an emotional food, cheering us when we're blue, jilted, premenstrual. It is related to the



brain chemical phenylethylamine (PEA), which makes us feel the roller coaster of passion we associate with falling in love, a amphetaminelike rush. But when the rush of love ends and the brain stops producing PEA, we continue to crave its high, its emotional speed. Where can one find lots of this luscious, love-arousing PEA? In chocolate. The theory is suspect, the pleasure is not. And sexual hunger and physical hunger have always been allies. The lips, tongue, and genitals all have the same neural receptors, called Krause's end bulbs, which make them ultrasensitive, highly charged. There's a similarity of response. Just ask Tom Jones.

Playwrights have been aware of the power of the nonverbal and have written it into the stage directions. In "The Emperor Jones," Eugene O'Neill writes: "From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse-beat - 72 to the minute - and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterruptedly to the very end of the play." What O'Neill wished to supply was a kind of background music to his hero's destruction. What he didn't fully realize was that the heart would mimic the rate as it accelerated. Our bodies automatically adjust to pace, pulse, rhythm. It was not long before the management posted a sign outside the theatre warning those with heart conditions that this production might not be suitable for them.

Which brings us to music. Music cuts across all ages, races, nationalities. It speaks to everyone. Birds make it, snakes are charmed by it, whales and dolphins serenade each other with it. In monasteries in Brittany, monks play music to the animals in their care. They found that cows serenaded with Mozart gave more milk. In Northern Japan, Ohara Brewery finds that Mozart makes the best sake. The density of yeast used for brewing this traditional rice wine is a measure of quality: Mozart increases it by a factor of ten. Certain music has vibrations and frequencies in common with birdsong. Plants have been shown to respond especially to Bach and Indian sitar music. The playing of country music, on the other hand, had the same result as providing no music for plants.

Hans Jenny a Swiss engineer and doctor has shown that sound can form intricate geometric figures- oscillating figures in liquids and gases, vibrations in crystals. The

forms and shapes are infinite and varied simply by changing pitch, the harmonics of tone, the material that is vibrating. So imagine what effect sounds can have on delicate cells, tissues and organs. Vibrating sounds form patterns and create energy fields of resonance and movement in surrounding space. We absorb these energies and they subtly alter our breath, pulse, blood pressure, muscle tension, skin temperature and internal rhythms.

Embryologists today agree that the ear is the first organ to develop in the embryo and that it becomes functional after only eighteen weeks; it listens actively from twenty-four weeks on. "The universe of sound in which the embryo is submerged is rich in sounds of every kind. And the mother's voice asserts itself in this context. After birth the newborn relaxes very little, until its mother speaks. At this moment the infant's body leans over and falls in her direction.

Adults respond in the same way. Auditory fibers are not affected by anesthetics, so they continue to transmit sound. We never stop hearing. Patients listening to classical music while undergoing anesthesia prior to surgery had fewer complications and faster recover. "Some of them are in a world of their own," one anesthetist reported. "They hardly notice the noise we make during hip replacements." Other studies showed that after fifteen minutes of soothing music, patients who had undergone extensive surgery required fifty percent less sedatives and drugs.

Oliver Sacks, the celebrated neurologist, maintains that the music therapist is the most important person at the hospital. In a celebrated case, one of his patients was liberated from her frozen state to play the piano. One had only to say Opus 49 to have her whole body posture and expression change. Her activity became completely normal as opposed to her coma-like stillness even when the music was only playing in her mind. Sacks, himself, had a like experience. He was hospitalized after a climbing accident with neural damage and partial paralysis. He "had forgotten how to walk and was afraid of losing his motor identity." To speed his orthopedic recovery, Sacks listened to the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Awakened by the music one morning, he rose from his bed and walked across the room to turn down the tape. The recorder was not on. He realized that he had walked for the first time in weeks. Listening to the music in his mind, he said, "served as a leg to stand on."

Humming has been found to be a reliable way to equalize brain waves, generating relief, relaxation, and clarity of mind. In a Dallas elementary school, the nurse plays tapes in her office. Instead of telling children that the antiseptic will sting, she tells them that it's going to put a tingling healer right into their scrape. She tells them that if they will hum while she does it, the healing will go deeper and they will feel better more quickly. She says, "Humming is one of the best ways to change tears of pain and fear into wellness."

The leading use of music and imagery for therapy is known as GIM, Guided Imagery and Music. It began in the 1960's at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, originated by Helen Bonny at the Maryland Psychiatric Center. The therapy is one of self exploration in which a person listens to specially programmed classical music in a relaxed state, allowing images and feelings to come to awareness. Bonny found that peak experiences - moments of great insight, surrender, wisdom, or the awareness of being fully loved- could be invoked by music. Music itself becomes the guide that allows images to emerge. It has been used successfully with substance abusers, psychiatric inpatients, the physically ill, and healthy people seeking personal growth.

According to John Berger, "All the languages of art have been developed as an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent," or as I said at the outset, to preserve. We ask artists to fill our lives with a cavalcade of fresh sights, sounds, tastes and insights, the way life was for us when we were children and everything was new

On that note, one last story, the only other time I was reduced to tears. Imagine creeping back into the depths of a cave, in this case Les Eyzies de Tayac in France. The passages are tortuous and entirely black except for the dim lantern held by our guide. Ahead, a deeper black and -who knows- the breath of some huge creature, the gleam of inhuman eyes, the scurrying of something furry underfoot. And finally the lantern is raised and my heart stops. On the wall, a handprint, outlined in black and colored in. A hand smaller than mine. The hand of a child, as small as the hand that stitched the sampler. And I'm awash thinking of a child braving this passage with a torch 40,000 years ago. What a testimony to the instinct as old as the species. The instinct for Art. "I am. I dared. This is my mark." Mute. Eloquent. Louder than words.

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