

The gesture of living

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“I allow my drawings to draw themselves”

All humans gesture, signal that they are alive. Activity is driven by need and desire, each defined and concentrated action becoming explicit through precise gestures dictated by the individual's particular physiology. Even before being charged with intent so that they become transmitters of culture, gestures are inherently instinctive, simultaneously expressing being and vitality. The living body quivers even when seemingly motionless, the blood in its invisible flow establishes by its liquid form, a basic undeniable relationship with the whole that it infuses.

The living constantly establish relationships of one sort or another with everyone else, dead or alive. The past is kept vital, ever returned to the remembering mind, thus restoring old gestures which emptied of their vital functions might have been forgotten, left for dead. Conscious gestures, emanating from the mixture of instinct and knowledge known as culture, tacitly express thought, sentiment, desire and contain within themselves an explosive charge making descriptive words redundant. These are the self sufficient gestures we call eloquent. It is in this way that the gestures drafted by Avi Eisenstein might be understood.

The written word employs images to render gestures less cryptic. Gesture is movement in space that supercedes mere rhetorical flourishes to symbolize moods and it establishes an energy that affects ideas. Linguistic usage itself demonstrates this for example in the phrase, “a nice gesture” to describe a praiseworthy action

or conversely, “a bad gesture”. And there are gestures that over the course of time can alter the very shape of a body, some of these are the gestures of long-practiced ancient crafts and they characterize the shape of their practitioners and even the way they think.

In painting, in sculpture, the gesture of the artist is a function of the end result. In most contemporary dance performances, practically the entire essence of a performance is made up of gestures. In biographical movies about painters and artists the subject is often depicted as given to exaggerated gestures with which, like using a sword, he slashes at the invisible demon of inspiration, fighting against it in order to give it form. With gymnastic like movements inside the studio, muscular lifting of canvasses, brushes, models, in short a gesticulation through which the inner creative impetus is shown to be expressed and the artist is transformed into one who seems possessed. This is how the popular imagination has perceived the artist, misunderstanding the gesticulations he employs in his work which are indeed part of it. This compares precisely with a farmer tilling his field, manually in the past, and now, in most parts of the world, by driving a tractor. In any case, the labour shapes the body, marks it for what it is by what it does. Body shapes are thus modified and also minds.

The working artist uses hands, body to truly embody spiritual perceptions, force them beyond the limits of matter; the blood coursing within the body operates within the gestures of painting or sculpture, with precision, like a good surgeon. The act of creation, so aptly called “act”, “action”, expresses the energy that the artist painfully extracts from his mutable vitality, and this is true even when vitality is expressed by applying a flat layer of color. Every artist creates his own ritual gesticulation, either subdued or spectacular.

It is nice to scrutinize old paintings and try to discover the nature of the gesture that created them. This way we discern that even Vermeer, seemingly so smooth and polished when seen from afar, when observed up close is seen to employ swift strokes to render the motion of light, despite the apparent stillness of the meditative scenes. We discover that certain lights in the works of Claes, apparently fractal along their edges, are the result of rapid gestures, and we cannot ignore how rapid, blunt, scratched and ungraceful are the gestures with which Tiziano and Tintoretto sought to represent the realities they were observing. Later, the impressionists depended upon scientific information to determine the separation of the colors they chose to use and upon the swiftness of their touch when arranging them to be reassembled on the retina in an organic and exact way, much like what had been done, albeit within the constraint of symbolism, by Segantini, Previati and Pellizza da Volpedo.

For the avant-garde of the twentieth century the gesture of choice needed to be unique and discrete. They did not see the world united with believers in a single faith universally and globally bound together. Secular universality is depicted by a vital swarm of magnified cells, homage to organic beauty, to the particle as part of creation either investigated scientifically or analyzed psychoanalytically.

The rapid gesture was not intended to make the subject more honest, but embodies its own particular integrity, without ulterior motives, without the deceptions of a craft that disguises its gestures - just a straightforward declared device. In the pictorial culture of the twentieth century, perhaps as a result of its very earnestness, space is the "ugly" elevated to the "beautiful". In this way the artist is no longer the "swindler", but has become a secular indicator who exposes the trickery and denounces it. Naturally a new code of knowledge came in the wake of such an heroic alteration

of attitude. The abstract gesture celebrates life itself not a derivative narration. This leads to the grand revolution of the gesticular abstract artists, from Gorky (still lyric and evoking atmospheres of sentiment, if not landscape, poetically revealing the mood) to the more compact Pollock (who, as early as 1948, after a mandatory passage through Picasso, sheds every naturalistic reference and squarely faces the gesture with all the respect due to it). Thus he names one of his big “drips”, *Number 1*. The absence of a title defers to the abstract doctrine of that period which sought to avoid all reference to any subject, even psychic, which could be thought of as personal experiences. Pollock’s wisdom is revealed in his invention of prosaic gesturing in which apparently uncontrolled drips of industrial paint reverse the traditional positions of artist and material, simply reaching a high spirituality quite void of any recognizable trace of the technique used. Once more, this is the challenge of “ugly”.

Today, forty years later, Pollock’s “drips” appear learned, a billion spots - not one more, not one less - extremely beautiful, painful and passionate, bearing simple and classic evidence of themselves.

What would happen, if it were technically possible to disassemble all of Pollock’s spots, arrange them in a row, and then mix them again? I believe that the result would never be the same, because the controlled casualism of the artist established the greatness of the work, with spots and drips that do not cancel a prior vision, but build a new one.

And in the seventies, we have the vaguely Japanese gestures of George Mathieu with their additional afterthoughts alien to Zen, mainly because Mathieu worked not with the immateriality of ink but rather with the bolder reliefs of his medium. There are also the gestures of Lucio Fontana, potent, calibrated and spiritual,



Brush Drawing, 1999, Diluted acrylic on paper, 65x50 cm



fig 2

A sculpted bone scythe hand

El Wadd,

8000 - 15,000 B.C.

Lucio, dapperly dressed, in front of the canvas with a cutter in hand, concentrates and then strikes, from top to bottom, marking the spiritual history of creation and going beyond his own humanity.

By using a material made to his specification, sometimes transparent and sometimes opaque, the Israeli artist Avi Eisenstein drafts his extraordinary signs on large paper sheets. These signs stir emotions by their poignant beauty, evidence of coming through from beyond the surfaces of another world, from the unconscious, but without the excuses with which those who journey into or from the unconscious use to explain it. We are dealing here with an ancestral and grand unconscious. These are gestures that always materialize an image resembling something known, without being its exact portrait or likeness. Eisenstein's forms are self-proclaimed, bursting with energy, free of pretension. These are signs that cause us to sense bodies, before even thinking of them, bodies without a hint of anatomy. These are gestures that, at times, are surprisingly the body of psychic and physical energies in their primary states. Therefore a Western person would require to work with all of Western culture in order to reach this level of intensity.

Eisenstein was born and lives in Israel, a land poignant with history, and he is an archeology buff. His ancestors were Russians, one relative being the famous film director. He himself defines his signs as "Sight-memory", by which he intends a visual perception, a judgment, and a point of view. While the artist observes an olive tree, a basalt rock, an archeological artifact (fig. 2), no actual visual reference remains discernible in the completed work, but it is present in the lively intensity of the brush stroke on which he concentrates, after meditating over his sketches. He intensely loves the existence within the olive tree, the basalt rock,

the archeological object, to which he returns their own cosmic power, shocking these simple things, trees, stones, fragments, with a new strength that, when observing the large papers marked in black, hits us as something known but undefined sucking us back into the depth of ancestral knowledge, the value of which does not require consciousness.

To realize these, Eisenstein, a very elegant man, with measured gestures, capable of catching minute details, both in perfection and imperfection, cultured and full of a savvy joy of life, gathers his energy, internalizes and condenses it, and then, like a modern samurai, acts, with carefully studied large brushes, precisely dipped in the mixture prepared, without a drop outside the sign, the dosage is exact, there are no second thoughts.

Once more, in the best abstract tradition, there are no titles to hint at and in so doing impose an interpretation. The memory of nature remains open, but whenever we think we have grasped the reference image, we realize that it is not what we thought, and this feeling of elusiveness grows when we look at the next sign, and the one after it. The paper is never a background, but a location, the four edges defining the archeological site that lodged the sign figures until Avi removed and resuscitated them.

Avi is an artist with a deep understanding of the principles and practice of graphic art, and from this he has his grasp of projects. But the best, and most necessary project, is the inner one, the one that frees, outside our body and mind, a trace left to others, to help understanding beyond the logic upon which we usually depend.



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Photo: Amando Pettinari