

Session VI

The Gesture of Making*

The symmetry between our hands is such that we would have to turn our left hand in a fourth dimension, if we wanted it to coincide with our right hand. Since such a fourth dimension is practically inaccessible, (“practically” meaning of course: handily), our two hands can never coincide, and are condemned to mirror each other forever. We may, of course, “imagine” their coincidence, for instance by complex manipulations of gloves or through film tricks. But if we imagine such a thing, we become dizzy. A giddiness takes hold of us which is not dissimilar to what is called the “philosophical vertigo”. The reason is that the symmetrical opposition of our two hands is an important aspect of the human condition, and if we were able to overcome it, even if only through imagination, we would have overcome our condition. Still: in a different sense we do try to overcome it. We do try to make our two hands “coincide” by bringing them together in a very specific gesture. Not, to be sure, in the “empty” gesture of clasping one hand with the other. That is no “coincidence” of hands, only a confirmation of their mutual opposition. But in the “full” gesture of bringing the two hands together through the mediation of some obstacle, some object. Let this kind of gesture be called the “gesture of making”. The purpose of the gesture is to make our two hands “coincide” within the object grasped between them. The object changes its shape under the pressure of our two hands which try to come together through it, and it is this new shape of the thing that is how our two hands coincide. The gesture of making changes the shape of the things around us, “at our hands”, and by thus “informing” our world, (changing its form), the gesture succeeds, in a sense, to make our two hands coincide, and thus overcome the human condition.

To be sure: many of the terms we use to describe the gesture of our hands as they try to coincide within the object have acquired by now an “abstract” meaning. So, much so that we tend to forget that such a meaning has been “abstracted” from hand gestures. Terms like “grasp”, “seize”, “apprehend”, “comprehend”, “manipulate”, “handle”, “manufacture”. This shift of meaning from hands toward mind is however, in itself, revealing. It shows to what extent the gesture of making, of having our two hands coincide within an object, is the

model of our thought processes. If we were to imagine a being just as capable of thought as we are, but with no hands comparable to ours, we would see how totally different would be its thought structures. Let us suppose that the deep sea octopus has a brain capacity similar to the human one: but it would be incapable of conceiving, of defining, of calculating, because those are aspects of hand gestures.

[...] Thus the curious symmetry of our hands, this opposition which allows no immediate coincidence, imposes the world its dialectical structure. [...]

Our hands are almost always in motion, but almost never in a disorganized one. There are various very complex patterns to how hands move, and those patterns have to do with various levels of relations. There is the relation of each fingers to the thumb, there is the relation of the fingers to the palm of the hand and of the other hand, there is the relation of the hand to both arms and to other body organs, there is, above all, that curiously symmetrical relation of the hands to each other. If we were to fix the line the hands follow while moving, for instance on a surface like in action painting, or on a video tape, we would probably discover an image of quite unbearable beauty: the image of our being-in-the-world. But do we not dispose in fact of just such an image? I mean of course: is not the world of art and artefact, the world of culture which surround us, a fixation of the lines human hands have followed in the course of the ages? Not quite: it is the fixation of those lines as they have been broken, again and again, by the resistance offered by the objective world.

The complexity of the motions of our hands is such that it defies description. But the gesture of making, which is only among those motions, may be decomposed, for “didactical” purposes, in a few relatively more simple phases. Let us repeat the basic structure of that gesture: the two hands reach out into the world of objects, seize one of those objects, tear it out of its context, and then press upon it from their two sides, in order to coincide within it. [...]

First, then, the hands reach out into the world, arms outstretched, fingers wide open, palms facing each other. We know that sort of gesture. It has to do with friendly welcome, with admission of an adventure, with opening oneself to the future. Let us call this phase the gesture of “perception”. But let us not be fooled by its passive, friendly, submissive aspect. Perception is not merely reception. It is, if watched more closely, a violently active gesture. It does violence to the world, it acts upon the future. It divides the world into a region be-

tween the two palms, (which it admits), and all the rest, (which it refuses). It opens a channel for the future to flow in, and by doing this, it excludes all the events which lie outside that channel. It is a segregating, (or, as Kant would say: categorical), gesture. It receives the world of objects, to be sure, but within categories imposed upon the world by the very gesture of perception.

[...] Hand motions are never “pure” motions. They are “practical”, have a purpose. Because the gesture of apprehending is a practical one, it need not go on until it has learned everything about the object. That would be an absurd undertaking. Hands can never learn every side of the object, because there is practically an infinite number of sides to every object. This is, in fact, what makes of the object a part of the concrete world: this practical infinity of its sides, this uniqueness which permits no comparison with other objects, no generalisation.

[...] The object is now practically comprehended, which means: previous gestures of making suggest methods how to change this one. [...] And there is a curious aspect to the motion of comprehension, “curious” in the strict sense of the term. Hands seem to like to play with objects not yet comprehended, in order to comprehend them. This curiosity of hands may be explained very noble by saying that the hands of men are the organs through which men take an ever increasing possession of the objective world, and that “curiosity” is the climate in which this conquest progresses. But if we keep our attention centered on those hands themselves, we need no such noble explanation. If hands in their motion of meeting each other strike against objects already having been comprehended, they do not waste much time in fingering and handling them: they proceed in their motion. But if they strike against so far not comprehended objects, they must perform the gesture of comprehension, if they are to proceed in their motion toward each other. They must “conquer progressively the world”. Curiosity, progressive comprehension and the urge for it, are thus seen to be an aspect inherent in hands and their motion of making. [...] The comprehended object is now being held between our two hands. [...] In the figurative distinction the left hand may be called the hand of “praxis”, and the right one the hand of “theory”, and the gesture of making that follows may be considered to be that motion in which “praxis” and “theory” attempt to meet each other. A motion through which the left hand tries to meet the right by transforming the object into what it ought to be, and through which the right hand tries to meet the left one by transforming what ought to be into the object. [...] All of a sudden, the two hands try to impress a value upon the object, a shape, a form, and the left hand tries to press the object into the form, while the right hand tries to press the form upon the object. Let us call this phase: the gesture of “evaluation”. It is as if the two hands had somehow agreed upon a form

suitable to this specific object. It is as if they had comprehended that the object leather is good for the shoe form and that the shoe form is “good” for the object “leather”. Evaluation then is this gesture of weighing the scale of object against the scale of form, this choosing of a suitable form for an object comprehended. [...]

Once the object has been evaluated, the two hands press upon it to force it into the form. They violate it: they do not permit it to be as it is. They deny the object as an object. They affirm themselves with regard to the object, and by thus affirming themselves they affirm the object as virtual product. This phase of the gesture may be called the gesture of “production”. It tears the object out of its context, which is the objective world, and inserts it into a different context, the world of products, of culture, of civilisation. To pro-duce is to lead an object out of one world into another. To change its ontological standing. [...]

The point involved in this description of the gesture of manufacturing is, of course, what our tradition calls “vocation”. But the observation of the gesture has the advantage of demythifying the concept of vocation. It is not the result of some mysterious voice which calls to the hands from somewhere “within” to choose this object there and impose a form upon it. And it is not only specifically “noble” objects like musical sounds, words or canvasses which are thus chosen by vocation. Vocation is seen to be the result for the discovery by the hands of their own specific attitude within an understood object, any object. There is the vocation for making shoes just as much as there is a vocation for making poems and it does not result from some mysterious special election, but from the fact that every single pair of hands has its own, specific attitude, its own, specific way of moving in the world of objects. [...]

Observation of the gesture shows that new forms are always elaborated under the pressure of objective resistance. They do not spring, ready, out of some “inner inspiration”, like Pallas Athene out of the head of Zeus, as our romantic tradition would have us believe, but they result from the shock between an already established form and the resistance of a specific raw material against it. To “have new ideas” is not creative. Creation is to elaborate new ideas in the process of making. Hands do not realize themselves creatively, if they impress stereotypes, (already established ideas), on raw material prepared “ad hoc”, which is the process of industrial manufacture. They realize themselves creatively only, if they impress prototypes, (new ideas), upon a raw material which is really raw, namely being understood by the hands during this specific process of manufacture.

In the present situation, it is in laboratories, in studios and similar places, but not in factories of the mass media, that one may observe the gesture of creation. The present pernicious division between stereotypical and prototypical gestures, between the alienated and the true

gesture of making, is one of the roots of our crisis.[...]

Now let us look at the result of this complex, and so characteristically human gesture. The most obvious result is that a piece of the objective world has been torn out of its context and has become as it should be. It has achieved value. An almost equally obvious result is that the hands have left a trace upon the world which will remain there for some time after their own disappearance. The hands have realized themselves. But although these two aspects are obvious, there is a taste of defeat in this victorious result of the gesture. Not only because the object does not show the form originally pretended by the hands, and therefore cannot be said to have been informed as it should be. In this sense Plato is right, of course, and to make is always “betray perfect forms”. But also because the two hands cannot really coincide within the manufactured object, and become a “totality”, a synthesis of oppositions. Right and left, theory and praxis, value and reality, form and matter, (or however one wants to call the two sides of the opposition), cannot really coincide in the “work”, the manufactured object, because such a coincidence is a “limit situation” of the gesture of making. The two hands advance within the object to meet each other, they come ever nearer and nearer, but their meeting is a situation, which can be infinitely approached, but never really accomplished. The gesture of making shows this to be so: at no point it is possible to say that the work is finished, (“perfect”).

The gesture of making ends when the two hands withdraw from the object, open their palms in a wide angle, and let the object slip into the context of valuable objects, of “culture”. We know, of course, this sort of gesture. It is the gesture of giving, of sacrifice, of resignation. Let us call it the gesture of “exhibiting”. Hands perform this gesture at a very imprecise point in the course of realisation, when it has become obvious that any further progress toward coincidence, toward perfection”, has become insignificant, “infinitesimal”. When it has become obvious that any further attempt to achieve totality will not really change the object. Hands exhibit their work, not when they are satisfied with it, but when they are satisfied that they can make nothing further. Thus to exhibit is a gesture of resignation.

But it is more than that. Although it is, in a sense, the last stage of the gesture of making, it has an entirely different structure. It is a loving gesture. The fundamental structure of the gesture of making is hatred. It is the gesture of defining, confining, violating and changing. The gesture of exhibiting is of a different world: it is one of offering, of abandon. The hands offer their work, and thus themselves to other human beings. They “publish”, they make public. To exhibit is a political gesture. A gesture which puts itself at the disposal of others.

And since it is the last phase of the gesture of making, it shows what making is all about: it is a gesture which seeks “perfection” through impression of values upon objects for the sake of others. Seen thus, as a whole, the gesture of making is a frustrated loving gesture.

Let us resume what was said here concerning the gesture of making: One may observe how man is in the world, if one observes how his hands move about in it. They move dialectically, because there are two of them, and because their symmetry is one of opposition. Some of their motions show especially well this attempt of the hands to achieve a synthesis of their opposition, and the gesture of making is one such motion. It may be considered to be a series of gestures, one following the other. The present investigation has distinguished between various such phases, although, of course, other observers may suggest a different classification: (a) perception, (b) apprehension, (c) comprehension, (d) evaluation, (e) production, (f) understanding, (g) manufacture, (h) creation, (i) tool making, (j) realisation, and (k) exhibition. Each of those phases has its own existential climate. They are specific forms of being-in-the-world. But there is an overall climate to the gesture of making: it is the climate of violent search of perfection in the objective world for the sake of others and it ends in loving resignation.

Hands may seem disgusting to unhuman observers as they move in the various stages of the gesture of making. But for us, who are those hands as they move, or who are those hands that will receive the result of that motion, hands are the fountain of truth, of beauty, of value.

* Flussers work on „gestures“ started in 1974. Flusser wrote manuscripts on “the phenomenology of the human gesture” for lectures to give and books to be published in four languages. “The gesture of making” is published in German in Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Düsseldorf and Bensheim 1991. From 1994 onwards Fischer republished it. There is a translation into Spanish published as *Los Gestos. Fenomenología y Comunicación* in Barcelona by Herder in 1994. In 1999 *Les Gestes* was published in Paris. Here a radically shortened version of Flussers English text is used.