

Jean Galard

An Art to the Bone

It is the most necessary art, the one in which every moment provides material and opportunity, the most devoid of conscious principles, stylistic categories, and well-known references, the art of conduct.

To know how to find, at the right time, the right gesture; to value the way as much as the objective; not to be satisfied with respect for customs or the ease of being uninhibited; to know, through minimal actions, to open the banal course of existence to the unexpected: some fortunate ways of behaving call for an understanding that seems to be of the same aesthetic order as the feeling that inspires, in contrast, the trivial failure of an attempt, the inelegance of a procedure, the affection of a way of being; however, they are far from being the subject of reflection as extensively studied as those commonly applicable to institutional arts. While cinematographic analyses, architectural conceptions, and literary theories flourish in speculative luxury, the appreciation of conduct and attitudes remains subject to the destitute jurisdiction of intuition.

We are constantly exposed to converting all our acts into gestures, into symbolizing a lifestyle, and a way of treating others. It is impossible, even in solitude or inaction, to prevent conduct from making sense (to mean, for example, isolation, retreat, sometimes resignation, desertion,) and thus to be expressive in the same way as a posture. Doesn't this whole set of attitudes (postures or impostures) that we inevitably adopt at any moment require a real art, which comes to evaluate, work on and recompose it?

Maybe the notion of art suggests an intention too intense, too concerted, to appear compatible with spontaneity and improvisation, which are supposed to prevail in the conduct of life. But, isn't it in the name of an aesthetic demand that we feel this very inconvenience (this incompatibility) and that we are embarrassed, for example, to see someone compose their image or

calculate their effects? Do the affected attitudes result from an untimely application of “art into life?” Do they not instead indicate that we have limited ourselves to the processes of a simplified art? The qualms of artistic activity lead it itself to undo the poses, mannerisms, and constructs that have been studied too much. Spontaneity is one of the ambitions of art; the wild, an aesthetic category.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam evokes “some singer who, near his fiancée’s death-bed and who overheard her sister cry convulsively, could not help but notice, despite her affliction, the flaws in her vocal emission which had to be signaled in these sobs and had in mind, in a vague manner, exercises designed to give them a fuller sound.” Villiers de l'Isle-Adam strives to convince us that pain or joy are not felt less intensely as the expression is contained than it is when it struggles in confused noises. He detects rather an emotional weakness in those beings who would like to encourage more spontaneous impulses, more frank and sincere passions, and suspects them of crying out in order to justify their inaction beforehand, which they feel will soon be reversed. Emotional agitation falsely pretends to be natural: it reproduces “ongoing sincerities,” and “accepted pantomimes.”

If it is true that every reaction is socially shaped, and that our gestures, even the most elementary ones, are learned, then the art that would apply to them would not contradict the “natural,” but would rather be a substitute for an earlier art, an implicit and unconscious aesthetic, which governs habit and sustainment, the capacity and convenience that underlies the demand of holding, or at least that of restraint. A deliberate art, attached to conduct, would not aim to oppose its possible refinement against the excesses of instincts; on the contrary, it would experiment with unthinkable gestures, which were excluded by inherited aesthetics.

Here, it is necessary to understand “gesture” in the widest sense of this term: not only in the strict sense (movements of the body, bodily uses), but also in the figurative meaning. To be resolutely vulnerable to danger, to stand up to a more powerful adversary, to embark on a hopeless undertaking for the sake of honor is to “act for the beauty of the gesture”—as if an aesthetic system, with constantly active albeit uninformed principles, made us believe that beauty can never look so good in the poses of defiance, in suicidal reactions, in glimmer and in gratuity. Tacit references also determine the judgment made on the whole process of a life: they set the criteria according to which a life is “successful” or “wasted,” they establish a model of “exemplary” careers, thus freezing the innumerable failures of missed existences.

Treat conduct as an art. To postulate that it can, like theatre or music, free itself from restrictive ideals, from accepted aesthetics. The following attempts will be to examine aesthetic relevance according to several competing definitions, each time exploring the possibility of applying it to all behavior. These hypotheses are intended to be presented as distinct approaches, as a series of sketches (as a series of gestures). Far from attributing itself a pre-constituted field of experience, a field of observation, the research here stems from a desire whose object is not observed but induced: based on an analogical scheme, it infers the possibility of provoking, in the very course of life, the formal consistency or emotional intensity that is known in artistic experience.

Translated by Adrian Mróz

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