

Tanya Leighton

Dead Precedents
Mike Sperlinger

Your body is a sentence
Or a measure, measuring, measure.
—Ruth Buchanan,
Bad Visual Systems, audio guide

This is a mirror. You are a written sentence.
—Luis Camnitzer

On the cover of *HELP!* (1965), I had always thought that the Beatles—standing in a row, all dressed in their dandy-blue, cod-Victorian smocks, their arms windmilling around them—were semaphoring the title of the album: H (George) - E (John) - L (Paul) - P (Ringo). Apparently that was indeed photographer Robert Freeman's original intention, but no one liked the results, and so they decided to improvise more graphic positions instead. The current consensus would appear to be that, interpreted according to the conventions of international flag semaphore, the band are in fact spelling N-U-J-V.

Not everyone agrees, however. Reddit user 6f6231 recently suggested, on the evidence of Ringo's ring ("All through out the movie, he wears the ring in his right hand, while in the album cover he has the ring on the left hand") that the image had been reversed somehow during production and that therefore the correct reading, once it was flipped horizontally, should be K-P-U-L.¹ Another user—now a kind of forum ghost, it seems, registered only as '[deleted]'—then responded that 6f6231 had, in fact, underestimated his own insight: "in a mirror-image, to a lenient eye, they do come close to spelling L-P-U-S ('elp us')." When I spent some time trying to reconstruct this reading, however, I discovered my eye was insufficiently lenient. [deleted], for example, thought that Ringo's arms, in the original published version of the image, "form no letter at all in standard view, however moving one arm slightly results in the letter



But to me, it seemed fairly clear that Ringo was, in fact, making the sign for 'disregard previous signal':



It is all, of course, a question of degree. But how far, exactly would we need to move the arm for the letter to become legible? How especially given different body shapes—could we be sure of our measurements at all? Semaphore seems to live on the precipice of one of Zeno's paradoxes, in which the theoretically infinite divisibility of degree between positions threatens that all poses fall into a zone of indifference and illegibility.

If even such a seemingly simple, geometric and one-to-one alphabet as semaphore is haunted by ambiguity, what hope is there for interpreting the shades and gradations of everyday body language? Marianne Wex's extraordinary, encyclopaedic project *'Let's Take Back Our Space': "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures* (1972–77) offers a polemical answer. Based on thousands of photographs which she took surreptitiously in the streets of Hamburg, it attempts a comprehensive taxonomy of gendered body language, categorised by posture ('Seated persons, leg and feet positions', 'Standing persons, arm and hand positions', etc.). Her own photographs are cropped to isolate figures, and sometimes reversed (like Ringo), in order, as she explained, "to better compare the various postures."² They are also supplemented with a variety of found imagery including photojournalism, advertisements, art-historical reproductions, family-album snapshots, pornography, mail-order catalogue clippings, publicity shots, television and film stills, etc. Cumulatively Wex's images,

¹ 'In the Help! Album, The Beatles actually did spell HELP US!', https://www.reddit.com/r/beatles/comments/2nj4lf/in_the_help_album_the_beatles_actually_did_spell/ [last accessed 12 November 2016].

² Marianne Wex, *'Let's Take Back Our Space': "Female" and "Male" Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures*, Frauenliteratur-verlag Hermine Fees, Hamburg, 1979, p. 360.

Under

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regimented into rows of seemingly identical poses (male along the top, female running underneath), feel overwhelming. Differences are drowned out by the impression of absurd, unwitting conformity. There is a levelling effect in terms of both the people pictured and the provenance of the images, so that a still of Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the film *Katzelmacher* blends innocuously into a row of men sitting with their feet planted widely apart, and Zsa Zsa Gabor's demurely-clasped hands in a society-magazine portrait rhyme with those of several anonymous women captured by Wex on the streets of Hamburg. Wex's cropping—both in terms of the framing of the images and the bracketing of meaning other than the gestural—is ruthless: a man standing on a field of bodies (“Jews murdered by Germans in occupied Eastern Europe”) is juxtaposed with a muscleman from a home-exercise ad and a tourist on a Bangkok beach. The question of interpretation, meanwhile, returns insistently to the macro level: it is about the patterns of resemblance which draw the eye from image to image, and then from posture to posture, like reading a line of text, rather than lingering on any individual figure. Only occasionally are there ‘exceptions’, single photographs floating above or below the general grid: a young man sitting with his knees clasped together in a ‘feminine’ posture (the caption says his “whole aura” was of being “underprivileged” and he “barely had his motions under control”); a middle-aged woman resting her arms on her thighs as she sits, legs spread in relaxed ‘male’ fashion.

I always find myself drawn back to those ‘exceptions’. In each case, I want to know: was this an accident, a momentary transition between poses which the shutter has captured and frozen as an aberration? Or was it some deeper, more consistent non-conformism? If so, was it conscious or unconscious? And then, turning back to the serried ranks of stereotypes, I start to question them too: how wide apart do someone’s legs need to be, exactly, in order for them to be sitting in a ‘male’ posture? At what *precise* angle do feet point inwards enough to become ‘female’? What is the appropriate measure of conformity? And then, more profoundly (or more absurdly): why treat a body as if it only spoke one language anyway? What if a body spoke many dialects simultaneously—its hands one, its knees another, its head a third—like a walking

Babel? In other words, I wonder how transparent these images are: if the gendered semaphore they seem to reveal can really be so stark, the stereotypy so universal, so remorseless...

But what is a stereotype, after all? Like a cliché, it is part of the history of writing and printing; before they had any metaphorical meanings, both were technical terms for a solid plate of metal type, cast in order to avoid the cost of resetting moveable type when reprinting a novel for example. The stereotype is a tool of industrial repetition: a form connecting writing, reproduction and economy. By extension, cultural stereotypes are precedents, examples, moulds. They are a kind of ‘lossy’ shorthand script, in which conventional thinking functions like a compression codec; like Hito Steyerl’s ‘poor images’, they are ideas optimised for circulation.³

We normally think of body language as a form of speech, something immediate and spontaneous, but perhaps it is closer to the technology of writing. Wex herself talks about one of the origins of her interest in body language being calligraphy. She studied the subject for several years, and published a pamphlet about it around the same time as *Let’s Take Back Our Space* was first exhibited.⁴ She became fascinated by realising how different forms of penmanship required different postures, as if the script radiated out from the fingers gripping the pen to affect the language of the whole body. But *Let’s Take Back Our Space* focussed not on the organic form of the individual the indexical element in handwriting, for example, the way in which it might be an expression of a whole mode of existence—but rather on the mechanical quality of mass-produced gestures: on human beings as themselves a form of collective script, a code for the reproduction of domination. Just as her early pop-art paintings (now sadly lost) had attempted “to paint everything as merchandise... be it characteristics, people, things, especially landscapes”,⁵ Wex now saw that her photographs of women and men from

³ See Hito Steyerl, ‘In Defense of the Poor Image’ (2009), *e-flux journal*, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

⁴ See Marianne Wex, *Schriftzeichnen: Gebrochene Schriften*, Institut für Lernsysteme, Hamburg, 1977.

⁵ *Let’s Take Back Our Space*, p.345.

Ground

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magazines and television, “clearly express the person as a prepared product of the media state”.⁶ At the same time, she felt the celebrities from these pictures were “just as much a part of my life as the people I deal with more directly”,⁷ because they were both a source and a product of the social hieroglyphics which Wex had observed in the streets of Hamburg, or her own body.

As Wex developed her research, however, it became clear to her that the stereotypes which imprinted themselves on the social body were as ubiquitous and as pervasive as the products she had painted. It was far from simply a question of the contagion of gesture, or the subliminal effects of media ‘role models’:

Even in my own apartment, if I look around at everything that surrounds me here, from the viewpoint of how much all these things have to do with me as a woman, I realise that other than a few stones I have gathered on my travels, there is virtually nothing that really has to do with me in a positive sense. Everything, from the architecture to every piece of furniture, every machine, the tableware, my clothes, the lighting, as well as that which comes in from the outside world through radio and television, is male-marked. Everything is determined by male interests and needs, created from a male-profit orientation.⁸

Body language, for Wex, was ultimately symptomatic: merely one visible expression of conformity to the all-embracing “male-profit” system, for which stereotypes—as for the early printing presses—were an economic, as well as political, necessity. Objects, clothes, architecture, lighting, the broadcast spectrum—every material aspect, visible and invisible, of contemporary culture was as prescriptively gendered as gesture: different dialects of the same fundamental language of power and subjection.

The audio-guide to Ruth Buchanan’s exhibition *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* declared: “The body is a language the same as writing is, the same as a wall is or being a door is”. But what language do walls or doors speak? Doors

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.346.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.347.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.350.

communicate between spaces, certainly—and we, presumably, are what is communicated. The Austrian writer Robert Musil wrote an essay in the 1920s called ‘Doors and Portals’, in which he declared that doors in modern buildings were like the removable cuffs of a man’s shirt.⁹ So perhaps architecture really is another language of male power, whispering to us constantly in words we cannot hear but which we repeat incessantly, through our gestures and actions. But are we only what we wear, or where we pass, or what we pass as? Is there no escape from repetition of the same rote identities, no other language that the body might speak? *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* did not offer answers to these questions, or any straightforward affirmation that escape is possible. Nor did it parse the precise angles or the measures by which we might know when we had escaped, when our gestures or our architecture would somehow be finally free of the “male-profit orientation”. Instead, Buchanan’s exhibition held up a mirror to all of the concatenating structures Wex had identified (gesture, architecture, lighting, etc.), reflecting above all their very interconnectedness, the way they function precisely as a network which must obfuscate its web of relations.

In the exhibition Wex’s panels hung on stands which Buchanan, together with architect Andreas Müller, designed especially: long horizontal purple-painted boards floating on powdery ice-green legs.¹⁰ This display system, as beautiful as it was, was not an adornment; it also divided the spaces of the Adam Art Gallery, redoubling the architecture of its narrow spaces. At the same time, Buchanan had placed phrases, partial translations from the captions from Wex’s panels—Under, Over, Hands, Politics, Pose, Body Form, possessive, etc.—in large letters, aligned vertically, on facing walls. Mirrors at the end of the spaces reflected both the panels and the words, together with the visitors themselves. Elsewhere in the exhibition, another

⁹ Robert Musil, ‘Doors and Portals’, *Post-humous Papers of a Living Author*, Archipelago Books, New York, 2006.

¹⁰ The display system was developed from one Buchanan and Müller had previously designed for an exhibition of Wex’s work which I had curated at the Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe in 2012.

Bends

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intervention, a curtain of small chains punned on the grillwork of the walkway it bisected. Everything echoed, lost its discrete edges: architecture as reflected/displaced in the work, the work in the signage, the signage in the audio-guide. These forms which Buchanan had interpolated were reiterations, freighted with the intuition that restatement is always also a re-performance, charged with the possibility or promise of failure. As the voice of the audio-guide put it: "We re-perform through and within the languages that we access, know, have learnt"¹¹

At one point in her project, Wex asked a group of students (including her daughter) to act out extreme stereotyped poses of both genders. Whereas the atypical man from her street photographs with his knees pressed together "barely had his motions under control", the gestures of the young man in her 'experiment' as he sits mincingly are hysterically under control: something close to camp. Freedom from stereotypes starts with recognising them, with repeating them, redoubling them, "in a mirror-image, to a lenient eye". The philosopher Gilbert Ryle once remarked on "the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink".¹² That difference—between the involuntary and the voluntary, the reflexive and the intentional, the imitative and the parodic—is both tiny and invisible, and yet it is also the (non-)space of possibility for another gesture, for a truly utopian 'exception'. It is the gap in which both Wex's cascade of images and Buchanan's subtle, imbricated interventions play.

The audio-guide again: "Language is ferocity, is derision, is deformation." If *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* was a form of mirror image then it was a linguistic one, a double negative: a deformation of deformation. (Just as 'Let's Take Back Our Space', in its sheer over-accumulation, is a kind of stereotype of stereotyping).

We re-perform through and within the languages that we access, at the same time this process often, and necessarily, creates precedents. Or broken, or that

which is broken, or breaking or breaks breaks breaks.¹³

What kind of an audio-guide is it which speaks to us of breaking in this broken form? We are listening, listening out for the reassurance of institutional authority, but it stutters. Language fails, we are (not) being told something, everything is at stake.

When we say that someone sounds like a broken record, after all, we mean they are stereotyping themselves—but we also mean we can hear that, we can hear the mechanism for once over the music, the *difference* between needle and groove. Listen to the record as it breaks breaks breaks.

¹¹ *Bad Visual Systems*, audio guide, Ruth Buchanan, 2016

¹² Cited in Heather Love, 'Close Reading and Thin Description', *Public Culture* 25.3 (2013), p. 406–7.

¹³ *Bad Visual Systems*, audio guide, Ruth Buchanan, 2016

Sits