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Signifying “It” by Demonstration: 
Feeling Processes of Signification on One’s Own Body

ANJA KRAUS

About “Pointing at it”

We learn language by “pointing at” things and by having things, localities, creatures etc. pointed out by others. A way of “pointing at” something is speaking about it, naming and entitling it. This refers to the deictic function of language. Words indicate things. Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: “[...] if I am shown various different leaves and told ‘This is called a `leaf´ I get an idea of the shape of the leaf, a picture of it in my mind.’”¹ In concrete situations we realize, beside an irreducible surplus of inexpressible sense, specific conjunctions of language and our actual reality on the basis of schemes (“idea of the shape of the leaf”). At the same time we perceive, more or less unconsciously, their difference. Wittgenstein goes on: “[...] But fur such a scheme to be understood as a schema, and not as the shape of a particular leaf, this in turn resides in the way the samples are used.”²

Not only logics and aesthetics are conjoined in this train of thought.³ In addition, a theory of learning and teaching is implied. This resembles the concept of the educationalist Franz-Josef Kaiser of “Active Learning”. Kaiser attaches “Active Learning” to the effort of the teaching person, “[...] to look for methods to facilitate a theoretical learning process on the basis of one’s own action modes.”⁴ Similarly Wittgenstein, in his function as a teacher in a primary school, made a point of encouraging the pupils to gather theoretical knowledge independently—following more or less their own initiative—by transforming this knowledge into fields of experience. In this context he speaks of “demonstrative teaching.”⁵

About Signifying

² Ibid., 73.
³ See, for instance, Felix Gmür, Ästhetik bei Wittgenstein. Über Sagen und Zeigen (Freiburg: Alber, 2000).
The sense of a word is not given. It is, as the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan argues, an effect. This means that in different contexts words have different meanings; In the context of water the word “wave” is connoted as “surge” and in the context of parts of the human body with “curl.” If we let this word pass through other fields of signification, for instances as movements of the human body or sorts of pastries etc., the meaning mutates in a metonymical way corresponding to the reference field. Lacan assumes that the signified thing always “slides” under the signifier.

A variation of the meaning of a word can also be generated by modulating the voice. The Polish producer Konstantin Stanislawskij asked the actors to perform the simple phrase this evening (segodnja večer) by varying the intonation in forty different sequences on the stage. This exercise shows that we can bring about metonymical effects of meaning with a part of our body, in this case with our voice.

**Pointing at, Signifying and Creation**

In reference to the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, particularly in his 1982 work *Margins of Philosophy*, Dieter Mersch develops his thoughts further and qualifies human creativity with the basic principle that so-called “locations” (in German Stellen), either inside or outside of a person, are “dislocated” (in German versetzt) or interchanged.

This means that, in the frame of a creation, something is associated with another thing or replaced by another thing. This procedure establishes a connection not only with the metonymical process of signification, but also those of aesthetic experiences and the artistic working process. An artistic expression, otherwise often located beyond language, here comes into the direct reach of verbalisation.

This thought is affirmed by the fact that, depending on the context, artistic works undergo a more or less incisive reinterpretation. Such metonymical signification functions are an effect of heterotopy. In art, for example, Marcel Duchamp thematizes this in his work *Fountain* (1917 Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which an article of daily use, a urinal or pissoir, presented in a museum-context is interpreted as the word of art "Pissoir". This signification is the effect of a cultural context, in this case the museum. One could also call the work of art in question a pissoir-“Pissoir”. In this pissoir-“Pissoir”, a heterotopy is carried out that causes a reciprocal signification between the work of art "Pissoir", and the

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article of daily use (pissoir), and a cultural topos as the museum. The effect of this metonymical signification was alienation, because at that time it broke with common, early-twentieth conceptions of art as such. Bernhard Waldenfels would describe this effect as an infiltration of the “Extra-Ordinary” into the “Ordinariness”. 9

Artistic Positions in the frame of context art even go a step further; a work of art displays itself as an interpretation or accentuation of the cultural sense of its location. To understand context art, the location of a work of art has to be identified, respectively, in a heterotopic context. This context or heterotopy functions in a discursive way. For instance, My Word (1999-2000) by Jochen Gerz deals with words on t-shirts, chosen by people as their personal slogans and personally-handwritten on their t-shirts. All of these people had reacted to a public call by a newspaper to participate in an art exhibition; however, they were hardly professional artists. Their task was not to produce works of art, but to perform art in persona. Because the t-shirts bore personally-handwritten slogans and the inscriptions referring to common contexts, the people wearing these shirts were intuitively connoted with the meaning “art work” by the people viewing them. At the same time, the unbiased reader of the slogan certainly connected the slogans intuitionally with the people wearing them. One would probably identify the wearer of such a t-shirt as the “author” of the slogan due to his/her handwriting. On one hand, it has been suggested that the designed t-shirt respectively My Word gives information about the person wearing it. On the other hand, the “author,” in a way interprets the slogan by his or her individual looks, behaviour, and his or her gestures, etc. The meaning of the written word is thus connected to the expressive qualities of a certain personality. By wearing the t-shirt in their everyday lives, the “authors” are transferring art into areas that are otherwise not connected to art. The location also influences the meaning of the slogan. In the interrelation of person, location, and slogan, significations arise without being connected to one of these three instances. Metaphorically expressed, the slogan—affiliated with the expressive qualities of a certain personality—passes through various semantic fields simultaneously, at the same time and concurrently making sense at different localities and at diverse levels.

Christiane Brohl, in reference to Land Art, has developed the didactic strategy of “displacement.” 10 This principle is based upon the reciprocal interpretation of the artistic work and the situational context. With this strategy, which is concurrently a teaching principle, Brohl shows that art interferes and intervenes in actual discourses and current semantic fields. At the same time, the “displacement” as a method can reveal these

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9 Bernhard Waldenfels, Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 4. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 167.

effects. The method of “displacement” is thus a possibility to let novelties merge into familiarities.\textsuperscript{11} Thus linkages between facts become possible that did not exist before.

**To stage ideas by means of the Coloured Hand**

By means of the *Coloured Hand*, processes of metonymical signification and principles of heterotopy and “displacement” can be introduced by “Active Learning” or by making them felt with one’s own body. Various gestures and practices provide the hand with qualities of a symbolic means rich in possible interpretations. Here, various demonstrative qualities - such as indicating, representing, appearing, displaying something, pointing at something as allocating, recovering, protecting, rescuing, touching, palming, caressing, allying oneself with another person, fraternising, associating, connecting, catching, holding, serving, commanding respect, menacing, preventing warning, ordering, giving, allowing, presenting, begging, saving, sweeping, smashing, carrying, ditching, exposing, stocking, framing, triumphing, glorifying, praising, saluting, bidding farewell, approving, seeking for something, palping and many more - were utilized. All of these practices and gestures are linked to the hand as a part of the human body, and allude to symbolic contexts that are even larger; sometimes they are shown, sometimes they remain inexpressible as such.

Students are asked to let a *Coloured Hand* wander inside and outside the building of the academy. The aim is to examine the relations emerging by the *Coloured Hand* encountering diverse objects, constellations, and situations. The students were instructed to take a photo whenever such relations seem to be somehow enlightening.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image1.png} \hspace{0.1\textwidth} \includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image2.png}
\caption{Works of diverse students, Universidad del Comahue in Neuquen/Argentina}
\end{figure}

Colouring one’s own hand transforms it into an extraneous object. The action of its owner is no longer casual any more and, at the same time, it loses its normal goal-orientation. Even if the hand belongs to its owner as previously, it functions as an item or an object that can be placed hither and thither, which can be ranged in an existing order

\textsuperscript{11} See the discussion above on the infiltration of the “Extra-Ordinary” into the “Ordinariness” (Waldenfels 1999, 167).
or it can be put on stage like the “enframing” (in German Gestell) as Martin Heidegger has put it. Via “displacement” the Coloured hand acquires diverse meanings. The fields of activity and meaning produced hereby lead far beyond the movements and gestures of everyday life. Thus one comes into contact with new vistas, with oneself, with others, and with concepts that are opened up. Forbidden territories and borderlands come in view. Locations can be assigned in an unfamiliar way. Dimensions lose their former measures, as they can be broadened, reduced, put into perspective or be distorted. Eventually, new, perhaps plurivalent interfaces, “in-between-spaces”, or places of refuge arise. On one side, sensemaking relationships between the hand and its surrounding can be established. In this manner can associations like strangeness, alarm, horror, protesting, playing, sensuality, eroticism, obsession, grandeur or comfort appear. Alternatively, one cannot deny that a largely anonymous, but nonetheless vital person very consciously uses her hand as a means of expression in the frame of a staging.

This ambiguous effect is used in the academy to select from the various photos taken, which show different rapports of figures and their backgrounds, relationships of people to their environment, relationships of the “I” and the world, and, finally, the individual and society. Questions such as the following could be asked: Does the Coloured Hand add some meaning to a certain situation, and, if yes, what meaning does it transport? Which associations could the arranged meeting of figure and background, person and space release? In which staged situations is the surprise effect caused by the Coloured Hand articulated in an explicit way? Where does the hand appear to be out of place? Where does the hand contact its surroundings? How to describe this contact? How did this effect function in the moment of the staging? Is the arranged situation definite or ambiguous? Is there any scenery described in literature comparable to this staging? Furthermore, one could explore the potential of “displacement” transported by the Coloured Hand. This means that the staging provokes an extraordinary effect, and perhaps that maybe something “new” has arisen...

Works Cited:


