

dramatic view of the world than that of a ‘healthy’ eye. So I started wearing glasses, and my vision grew so dependent on them that a quarter without them would cause vertigo. Still, I tried to wear them as little as possible, especially during recess, to avoid taunting. I remember scrambling onto a cone-shaped climbing frame that stood in front of my school, which we called a ‘volcano’. Enamel paint was always flaking off and sticking to my sweaty palms. The volcano had a circular opening at the top, which all the children wanted to reach to lower themselves into the structure—even though, if you were small enough, you could easily squeeze in-between the bars of any level. I remember lying inside and looking up through the crater onto the grey sky, imagining being swallowed by the earth.

Every year I looked forward to the end of November, that period where folk magic and institutionalised religion came so close together, revealing their underlying hypostatic union. On the eve of Saint Andrew’s Day, from the 29th to the 30th of November, all women in my family would gather to engage in various forms of divination. My favourite was ‘carromancy’—the name of which I was not familiar with back then and which I called simply ‘wax pouring’. This ancient form of fortune-telling has been found among cultures all over the world, but back then, it appeared to me as familiar and local as any other Polish holiday tradition. First, my grandma would heat half-used candles and fish out wicks. I scooted up, peeking beyond the edge of the kettle as random colours liquefied into one undefinable hue. Meanwhile, my cousins prepared a large bowl of cold water and a mortice key—from an old wooden cabinet in the hallway. Then, things would progress rapidly—each of us was handed the saucepan and poured a stream of molten wax through the key’s bow. On contact with water, the wax would immediately solidify. We dried the pieces carefully, then held them up against the lamp and interpreted shadows cast upon the wall. At times, the wax figures would break during the ‘reading’ and the breakage would be incorporated into the premonition.

Saint Andrew’s Eve is the last night before the start of the Advent period—a liturgical season of preparation for Christmas. Throughout that period I would get up very early, before sunrise, and march to the church along with other children, lighting the way with self-made lanterns to attend the *roraty*, the morning liturgy in honour of the Virgin Mary. The name ‘roraty’ came from the first words of the Gregorian chant ‘Rorate Caeli’, which means ‘Drop down ye heavens from above.’

Di Sotto in Su, Italian for ‘seen from below’, is a term referring to a specific painterly technique, applied mostly to ceilings, where figures are represented in extreme foreshortening so as to create the illusion of depth and suspension. Mantegna’s famous ceiling fresco in *Camera degli Sposi* (‘bridal chamber’) of the Ducal Palace in Mantua depicts a faux oculus, framed by a circular, opulent garland, with a group of onlookers gathered around the opening, peeking from behind the ornamental balustrade—including courtiers, servants, cherubs, and a peacock. The painting appears as a humorous commentary on social hierarchy—the frolicking putti, the smirking crowd, and the luminous blue sky are forever unreachable for the lowly onlooker, and a heavy vase precariously balanced on the edge may fall on one’s head at any moment to the great amusement of the heavenly dwellers. Mantegna was one of the first painters to play with the optical illusions and to consider the viewer’s physical position, paving the way for exaggeration and excess of Baroque illusionistic painting. Another, radically different use of foreshortened perspective can be seen in his famous painting ‘Lamentation of Christ’. Christ’s body is represented reclining, feet first, drawing focus to nail wounds in his hands and feet. The representation is anatomically incorrect—seen from that low a perspective, the feet would need to be much larger, partly obscuring the body. But that’s not what Mantegna was aiming for—his is a *theoretical* perspective, where impossible vantage points and sight lines carry symbolic meanings.

A general theory of gestures would be a meta-theory of linguistics, because language is seen to be a particular kind of gesture ... language would no longer serve, as it always has, as a model for deciphering all other gestures (so that one speaks of a “language of dance” or a “language of pantomime”). On the contrary, a general theory of gestures would have to furnish a model for deciphering the gesture of language.

‘I guess it’s the question of where we look for meaning,’ she said.
‘Or where we find it.’
‘If we look for it, we always find a meaning. But it can’t find us if we’re not looking.’

This text was written on the occasion of the exhibition ‘eye levels’ by Magdalena Stücker, Gabriel Huth, Marlene Posch, and Julian Stiffert, which opened at ZSenne, Brussels on April 2025. Alicja Melzacka is a curator based between Maastricht and Brussels and living a dozen imaginary lives.

And several years into building the structure, many started asking themselves—‘Is there ever going to come an end to this soaring accumulation of material?’ ‘When is it finally enough,’ they whispered to one another. They whispered not out of fear but of exhaustion. Every few metres wrenched out of heaven and every hundred sticky boulders stamped with ochre fingerprints, they were awashed with another wave of disappointment. Still no sight of heaven. The flaming red eye stared them down, unyielding, their tongues sweating, necks sore, and faces burnt from looking up. Until—at once—trembling, rumbling, the builders clenching onto rubble as it flew in all directions. And wherever a stone fell, a temple was built, and a civilisation was founded with its own language and customs. So distinct that when centuries later their descendants met, they could not understand each other.

That’s what she believed. But what if that wasn’t the case? What if they never stopped hurtling away?

Without a reference point, falling feels like stasis. It *is* stasis. What if entire civilisations were formed upon and still reign over those plummeting bits of debris? Worst of all—what if there had been no common language to begin with, and the only communication was communion through sweat and blood and breath?

She said her goal in life, the reason she’d been sent to this earth was to seek and gather the words of that lost common language; words that she believed could awaken solidarity buried in the deepest corners of the human mind. She looked for, and she found, traces of that language hidden in different words. When asked how she recognised them, she would always answer that they had found her. Travelling across the country, she collected words whose analysis would reveal that primordial structure. Primordial—of the first order—the natural, essential structure that everyone was born with. She transcribed them, compressing syllables and removing stress, ridding them of voicing, aspiration, and all distinguishing features, breaking them down to morphemes and going beyond morphemes, where no meaning can survive, where language reunites with image. She was trying to dovetail these bits together, force them into units that would become the building blocks of the recovered universal language. And people would say she was crazy, ‘Here is that crazy lady roaming around with her pocket recorder and telling us we should all love each other.’

‘Bouba/Kiki’ or ‘Takete/Maluma’ effect is a linguistic phenomenon where certain sounds of speech are widely associated with specific visual qualities. Across various languages, it has been observed that certain phonemes bear similar associations. When presented with a pair of ‘nonsensical’ words, speakers often pointed to the same set of traits associated with their sound. The average percentage across all the studies wavers around 88 per cent—much higher than would be expected by chance. The ‘bouba/kiki’ is one such pairing, where ‘bouba’ tends to be associated with a rounder shape while ‘kiki’ with a jagged, angular one. Some claim this has to do with the vowels’ quality and the shape the mouth assumes during articulation, while others—that this phenomenon disproves the arbitrariness of language by exposing the inherent relationship between sounds and forms.

Looking at a Mesopotamian, hardened clay tablet in which signs had been inscribed, one can relive the objective hidden behind it. This gesture was about the tearing out of image elements (pixels) from the picture plane and ordering them into rows. It was a picture-tearing, iconoclast gesture. Its intent was to tear up images to enumerate, to account for their content, to be able to narrate, to “clarify” images: It was an enlightening gesture. The question that now poses itself is this: Why is it necessary to explain pictures? Why enlightenment?

*To answer, one has to consider how pictures are made. Let’s take as an example one of the oldest pictures known to us (maybe that of a pony at Peche–Merle)... The picture fabricator stepped back from a pony, contemplated it, and inscribed the fleeting vision into the memory of the wall. He did it this way, so others could recognize the vision. And he did all these extraordinarily complex things so that his vision could serve as a guide for future actions (for instance for the pony hunt). The function of the picture as a plate for orientation is significant here (our intent is to consider what motivates linear writing). The process of lining up pictograms began when trust in pictures as guides for orientations in the world started to diminish.*¹

In palaeontology, a ‘chimera’ refers to a fossil assembled using pieces from multiple specimens, usually of multiple species. Essentially, it results from errors or, in some cases, deliberate deception, where mismatched parts are combined to form an exaggerated or fantastical creature. The chimeric origins of ‘protoavis’—a supposed ancestor of birds, excavated in Texas in 1973—have been widely debated. Many palaeontologists found the reconstruction so interpretative that it earned the nickname ‘palaeontological Rorschach test’. If regarded as the first modern bird, protoavis, dating back to Triassic period, would push avian origins by some 60 million years. Paradoxically, for that reason, many creationists embraced the find, contending that it ‘falsifies’ evolution by placing the descendant at the same time as the ‘supposed’ ancestor.

In the 19th century, paleontological displays became a popular attraction and an earning model. The third mounted skeleton to be produced was ‘Missourium’—a name given to mastodon fossils discovered in Benton County, Missouri in 1840. Assembled by self-proclaimed ‘doctor’ Albert C. Koch from bones of at least two specimens, the mount achieved an impressive length of nearly 10 metres. Touted as biblical Leviathan, it became a sensational exhibit, eventually acquired by the Natural History Museum in London. Chimeras often met a sad end—orphaned by the world of curiosity cabinets and freak shows, they were too imaginative for the world of science and too real for the world of art. While the composite fossil material of ‘Missourium’ survived, the exhibit has since been dismounted and reassembled according to anatomically correct principles, and it remains on display in the mammal section of the museum, as an unassuming mastodon specimen ORI5913.

I clearly remember the first and only prehistoric cave painting I saw. I forgot about time. I felt stupid for crying—how predictable, I thought. And I lifted my hand to inspect my palm and cried because I knew I could never produce anything so necessary as those imprints, and I cried some more at the thought of my crying being so predictable, of me falling once again for the old trickery of authenticity, essentialism even.

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All fragments come from Vilem Flusser’s ‘Crisis of Linearity’ (1988) and ‘Toward a General Theory of Gestures’ (1991).

And then, I began to wail as I was reminded of time, as the automated trolley in which I sat with three other tourists started moving again, and I was carried away, following the choreographed spotlight pointing to where I should look next.

What happens here can be phrased in this way: humans want to (have to) change the world, and with it themselves. To achieve this they first retreated from the objective world, to make a picture of it for themselves (the case of the pony). Then they subjected this image to a linear critique (the case of the alphanumerical explanation). Thereafter they calculated this linear critique (the case of the anumerical analysis). And now they have at their disposal a new power of imagination that allows them to project synthetic images that are already entirely critiqued and analyzed. That's how people achieved the goal that they aimed for since the beginning of humanity: Digital code is the perfect method to change the world after one's heart's desire (perfect for hunting ponies).

The bread in the oven hadn't risen yet. He was pottering about the kitchen, gathering dishes and immersing them in the sink filled with detergent-laced water, lazy bubbles drifting on the surface. The perfumed green apple scent made her sick. With her cheek resting on her right palm, coarse and covered in dried-up dough, she was staring at a flour-covered tabletop, marked with signs of their labour. Her fingers lazily furrowed lines across the white plain, crimping and scattering scants of flour. A formation of intricate ridges and slopes. Seen from above it looked like 'Tundra landscape', he said, peeking over her shoulder, with a bowl in his hand and a kitchen towel slung over his neck.

She responded with a semi-audible hum, which indicated not so much an affirmation of what had been said as a lack of interest in continuing the conversation. But that didn't deter him.

'What is this?' His voice reached her muffled as if traversing some invisible barrier between them.

'Hm?'—another attempt at rudimentary communication.

'What *is* this,' he repeated. 'What is this *supposed* to be?'

'What do you mean,' she asked without looking up, still nipping clots of flour, now sticking together through the absorption of moisture from her skin. He walked around the table, his head tilted, studying the patterns. 'From here, it looks like some sort of fungus ...'

She kept kneading the flour which by now, had turned into dough, her gaze affixed to the grooves.

'Or a blaze ... a Rocaille ornament,' he said, his index finger repeatedly tapping his lip before pointing at the inferred shape. She knew he expected her to look up and try to see what he was seeing, but she hunched down even closer over the table and started finessing one of the lines' edges with her fingernail.

'I like it, maybe we should photograph it,' he continued, growing slightly disconcerted by her silence.

'I mean, who knows, maybe you can use it later, you know, it's like we talked about ... you can't force it.

But one day something happens and you become unstuck. You just have to keep your eyes open.'

With each sentence she felt more pressure building up inside her head, causing ringing in her ears.

She knew she had to do something. 'Let me help you,' she sputtered out, pulling the towel from his neck and heading for a stack of wet dishes.

He took her place at the table, pensively looking at the composition of strokes she left behind. For a few minutes, the only sound was the clanking of dishes as she was wiping them dry. Then she heard him snap a photo with his smartphone.

'This is so you,' he said with a smile that she read as a smirk. 'I would immediately recognise your gesture ... the longer I look at it, the more I see it.' Her knuckles went white from clenching a tablespoon she was polishing. She lifted it to the light and caught a glimpse of her reflection.

'I photographed it for you,' he wouldn't yield. 'You are always so undermining of your own stuff ... and I think it's going to be worthwhile, you know, to look at it later, and try to understand what it is ... Even if you don't know that yet ...'

From the concave surface, a face looked back at her, with glassy eyes, tightened jaw, lips pressed together to the point of disappearance—the face doubly distorted.

'... You know, in no time you will start painting again!'

Do you know how, when you drop a piece of pottery and it breaks into chunks, and you try to glue them back together, there's always a bit missing? And you search everywhere, but you won't find it. It's been pulverised. You've inhaled it. It's part of you now, so it's as if it never existed. In the beginning, there was you and a plate. In the end, there is you and the plate.

I guess what I'm trying to say is the works make me think of the cycles of material transformation, of death and renewal, not only in the physical sense but also in terms of materials' circulation across different

mental domains which we neatly divide from one another in order to make sense of the extractive world order; the domains we call 'nature' or 'industry' or 'culture'.

I have to think of various semi-circular motions within the work, and how they appear to feed back, folding onto themselves. Yet, with every transformation cycle, something is lost, some degree of entropy takes place, and we arrive at another place.²

I dream of bell cemeteries. Bells becoming cannons and canons cannonades.

The concept of "gesture" may be defined as a movement that expresses a freedom. The gesture, as the movement it is, is in fact determined, as are all other movements, and in this sense completely explainable. But what makes it unique is that, untouched by any of this, it expresses a subjectivity that we are forced to call "freedom." Accordingly, the competence of a general theory of gestures would be the study and ordering of acts of expressions of freedom. It would not be a formal theory, for it would not be concerned with freedom but with its phenomenal, visible expressions. For this purpose, it would have to refer back to all accessible information that the relevant objective disciplines offer but could not stop there; for because it is dealing with expressions, it would be a study of meaning, a semiology. The dialectical tension between objective information and meaning would be the field to which it would necessarily apply.

² Here, I've recirculated fragments from a text written for Arthur Cordier's exhibition 'Laatste Ronde' at Trixie, The Hague (2023).

Scouring through the stacks of cardboard boxes and plastic bags stashed away in the attic, he finally comes across the little aluminum box, which, some twenty years ago, stopped being a biscuit tin and became a treasury of his most cherished items. He opens the box and starts taking out the objects, one by one: frayed coloured ribbons, a yellow feather, a broken candle, prayer cards—until he finally reaches the little golden nugget, the size of half a walnut, its textured surface glistening in the attic's dusty half-light just as it did when he was first handed the stone. The bottom of the box is lined with photos, among them a picture of him and his grandfather posing in front of a tall, cylindrical metal mesh structure, flanked by four apses and topped with a copper openwork dome. For his last birthday, his grandfather took a trip to the oldest still-functioning zoological garden, founded in 1752 as a menagerie of the Habsburg's summer residence in Schönbrunn. While today, he no longer takes pleasure in visiting zoos—a relic of an era far too close for comfort—he remembers sharing the awe with which his grandfather, an avid bird lover, approached the historical aviary.

Both his grandfather and great-grandfather worked in the mines, winning black gold. He remembers repeating that phrase with pride at school, thinking that black gold was some form of rare precious metal. He remembers celebrations of the mine's 70th anniversary, with a big band and long flower wreaths in procession, ribbons dragged on the ground, men with cheeks reddened by liquor paid for with company scrip. He remembers looking up, running behind his grandfather and trying to catch a glimpse of the figure of Saint Barbara, emerging from the sea of coloured petals, lace, and crepe paper as she was paraded on a float. His grandfather used to tell him stories of underground adventures—of comradeship and solidarity, of treasures ripped away from the body of the earth. He listened, petrified, to stories of rare gems and fossils found underground, which his grandfather's friend Bouba said they couldn't bring to the surface out of fear of the *putheks*. Like many miners, Bouba was missing two fingers, which he said were taken by the witch. Anybody who dared to point in her direction lost their finger. It was Bouba who handed him this little chunk of pyrite, telling him it was called 'fool's gold' because only a fool would dare to snatch something out of the witch's vault.

He remembers his grandfather teaching him words of the vernacular language that developed among the miners—a mixture of the local dialect and several other languages. Everybody is equal underground, his grandfather would say, locals, migrants, free men, detainees ... an alternative society with its own rules and language. He himself can't speak it anymore—his father never worked in the mines, and they moved away from the region early on. When he would come to visit, he saw the language become part of the local folklore, celebrated but also co-opted by advertising, used to market the nascent experience economy that was meant to lift the region from poverty. He thinks of how that language must once have been born in sweat and dust, out of essential need, desperation even, to communicate. A product of strenuous, dire labour conditions. A survival tool. Everybody is equal down below ... It's a question of scale and of a reference framework, he thinks. In relation to something big enough, everyone appears equal.

He wades to the other end of the attic, across piles of old furniture, broken pieces eternally waiting to be repaired or used as spares, an assemblage of different kinds of wood and metal. The slanted roof windows allow hazy light to seep in, feeble rays wandering across a wooden framework that stretches the full length of the wall, with numbered wooden compartments behind small barred doors—a pigeon loft. The sight makes him think of those Japanese capsule hotels, a weird diachronic association. The loft has been abandoned for so long, the smell has left it too. He's heard of his grandfather's passion for pigeon racing before but never had a chance to learn anything about the sport, which his grandfather took up after retiring from the mines. Miners have a particular relationship with birds; after the mine's closure, many have pursued pigeon racing as a hobby and bird breeding as an important secondary occupation. Racing Homer pigeons and Harz Roller canaries are miners' favourite breeds. Like many others, his grandfather suffered from black lung disease—perhaps that's the reason why he didn't fear the bird fancier's lungs anymore. This is how his grandmother reminisced about his grandfather—always concerned with underworldly or heavenly matters, never walking firmly on the ground.

Suppose we set out to research "baroque." The general theory of gestures and the history of philosophy are equally competent for this problem... but they have an antonymic relationship in their attitude toward the task of deciphering the "baroque gesture." For the history of philosophy, the baroque gesture is primarily a "gesture of work" that has solidified into numerous concrete works. It is an "art form." From the concrete works, a specific kind of active being-in-the-world can be deciphered, which can be called the "baroque mentality." ... Of course, that does not mean that the gesture occurs exclusively in the form of artworks. On the contrary, the history of philosophy must concede that there is a baroque style of communication, a baroque ritual, and a baroque absurdity ... And it certainly does not mean that this gesture occurs exclusively at the time called "baroque." On the contrary, the history of philosophy must concede that a baroque gesture may occur at any time. But it does mean that, for the history of philosophy... The baroque gesture is an expression of a being-in-the-world that may occur anywhere, at any time, but that predominated in Europe of the seventeenth century.

For the general theory of gestures, the "baroque gesture" is above all a specific aspect of ritual gesture as it can be observed in everyday life. It has a circular specificity, for it tends to distort a circular movement toward a parabola or ellipse. The theory of gestures might examine this baroque specificity in the movements of the spoons of people eating soup, so as to move from this and many other similar microelements to look for structurally analogue expressions in other forms of gesture... This is only an example—or the theory proposed here, the baroque gesture is one aspect of many (possibly all) observable gestures.

At school, I had difficulty playing sports. At times, it felt as if the ground sloped ahead of me, and I would misjudge the ball's placement, kicking the air or tripping, setting the rhythm for my classmates' laughter. That lasted until I was diagnosed with astigmatism—the cornea of my eye appeared not to be perfectly domed but curved more steeply in one direction. My cornea was baroque, and it projected a more dynamic,