

## **Cheap Tattered Gloves: Getting a Grip in the Modern World**

By Timothy Hall

There was a time when the things that we made were things-in-the-world, and when we knew that we were in that world as well. Michael Conforti, in *Field, Form, and Fate*, speaks of a relationship between archetype and form, wherein “. . . individual experience is temporarily superseded by the workings of transpersonal archetypal fields that follow prefigured trajectories in their journey from potential to form” (44). There was a time, to continue with Conforti’s analogy, when we wore the world as a glove. With our minds inside this glove, we shaped our environment, and, since we are bodily a part of that world, we shaped ourselves as well.

The most important tool at hand was, and remains, language. With words, we affirm to one another that we are physically “. . . in the common, or intersubjective, field of experience” (Abram 44). This may seem to be obvious, but is not. Beginning with Plato, if not earlier, European thought has attempted to separate the physical world from the world of the mind. The ideational sundering of the world, which created a chasm between objectivity and subjectivity, may well be responsible for the alienation that accompanies living in a depersonalized world.

Descartes is often held almost criminally accountable for this, and is also often given credit for the dualism that acted as a match to spark the scientific and technological revolutions that followed the objectification of the physical world. This is not entirely fair to Descartes, nor to others who set the course of European civilization toward the scientific method and eventual industrialization. Rejecting the idea that a malevolent Being was simply deceiving him with false

perceptions, Descartes found that his only assurance of any existence beyond that of his own consciousness was to assume that a veracious God was responsible for the perceived world.

However, in *Notes Directed Against a Certain Programme*, he also states:

. . . that, over and above perception, which is required as a basis for judgment, there must needs be affirmation, or negation, to constitute the form of the judgment, and that it is frequently open to us to withhold our assent, even if we perceive a thing. I referred the act of judging, which consists in nothing but *assent*, i.e. affirmation or negation, not to the perception of the understanding, but to the determination of the will (Descartes 446).

In this moderately obscure paragraph, Descartes *presupposes* that cognition is participatory: we have the choice to accept the existence of consciousness within the physical world, or to reject any connection of mind and body altogether. He gave a small nod to the existence of the universe, but unleashed a cascade of ontologies based upon the malleability of a world consisting solely of atoms and molecules. The world became a source of exploitable objects, rather than a partner in co-existence.

In *The Voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak proposes that although the evolutionary process had worked on the human brain for a long time, there came a point when human intelligence “. . . [lost] the immediate responsiveness we find in animals; instead it comes to be expressed in rite, ritual, myth, symbol – teaching and images that embody what was once instinctual” (91).

One of the most obvious places to notice this change in consciousness is in the effect that it had on flat representational art. Perspective in painting, based on a logical, scientific sense of optic perception was introduced. With horizons and vanishing points (which did not belong in the Euclidian geometry of the time), this new imagery attempted to reproduce what was seen by the human eye. Prior to this, European paintings stressed the relative subjective importance of

objects and people: in medieval works, kings were big, and servants were small, no matter how close or far away they were.

To a modern sense of art, medieval art looks primitive, and in a sense this is true. The work of Grandma Moses and other Primitive painters also illustrate the subjectivity of presence that comes with a pre-Cartesian awareness of Being-in the-world. Picasso and the Cubists, along with the Abstract Expressionists, marked a return to art that came directly from personal subjectivity in a way that was similar to the work done by Breughel and by Bosch.

Dali and other Surrealist painters flamboyantly (and lucratively) connected their paintings to images that they claimed were derived from the recently discovered unconscious mind. Beginning with the Impressionists, artists began to question the meaning and content that were intertwined with representational art. The phenomenological realities of the painter became as important, if not more so, than his or her technical skill. The realism of the established academies was rejected as being *not* real: the individual human realities that are fundamental to personal existence could not, they seemed to say, be communicated by expensive postcards or by impersonal photos.

One of the fundamental precepts of Phenomenology, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty constructs it, is that consciousness is *in* the world. It is not parallel to it, as Descartes would have it. It is not above the physical world as the Subjective/Transcendental Idealists Berkeley and Husserl saw it. And it is not below it in the way that a nail is impacted by a hammer, as Heidegger and Hume maintained (not so graphically, perhaps, but that is the concept).

Instead, because human consciousness is capable of perceiving an overwhelming amount of information, and because of the nearly uncountable ontological planes on which that

information is found to be important, choices have to be made about what will engage our attention.

In the integral world of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty says that information that is not important to subjective consciousness becomes background, which medieval paintings so clearly illustrated: “. . . an object cannot become an object without the surrounding objects’ becoming a horizon” (Merleau-Ponty 78). Attention is paid, in varying degrees, to those things that are selected, i.e., to those things that are immanent to consciousness. The world that so appears is selected (or “constituted” to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) for reasons of physical, cultural, emotional and, at times entirely random importance. In a way, we *choose* the reality within which we live, and we construct the world from the materials that we find before us.

Choice, then, is central to phenomenal consciousness. Our conscious sense of self is dependent upon the choices that we make, in much same way that a painter’s work is dependent upon the colors that he or she selects. And as an artist’s work is constructed within a chosen medium, such as oil, bronze or clay (or any other material out of which a piece can be made), self-definition is fundamentally constructed out of “found” materials. As an artist can choose to paint realistically or to paint impressionistically, in many ways a person can choose the ways in which they are human.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger pointed out that our options in this are limited, for most purposes, by the impact of the world upon us and by those cultural and familial situations in which we find ourselves. This situation of *geworfenheit*, of “thrownness”, feels unavoidably evident. But Merleau-Ponty observes that we *are* physical beings: we are not tossed into objectivity without choice in the way in which we perceive the world, not do our minds float above it like spiritual balloons. The world, he said, is “. . . an open and indefinite multiplicity of

relationships which are of reciprocal implication” (Merleau-Ponty 82). He found, as do many Asian religions, that there is no true separation between objectivity and subjectivity. We are in *that*, and *that* is in us.

The concept of the world as an inexhaustible source of things to exploit and profit from has become a problem for the entire planet. Not only has the environment been seriously damaged (perhaps irrevocably), but narrow definitions of what it is to be human have led to wars, pogroms, and slavery. This is not limited to the West: there have been religious wars and bigotry everywhere and the pollution of the air and water are not the sole responsibility of Euro-American culture and industry. It does seem, however, that societies with a vision of Paradise as being somewhere else, and on a different plane of existence, have set the patterns of organized, industrial degradation of the planet and of the species.

With Descartes, as Susan R. Bordo says in *The Flight to Objectivity*, the world changed: “For Descartes and Galileo, what one smells, sees, hears, tastes, and touches can no longer be taken as a bridge to the world” (45). If the physical world is not a part of what Rudolf Otto called the numinous world, it is exploitable. When our understanding of the planet loses any sense of sacredness, there is no need for qualms about damaging it, or for ethical explanations.

Because of the harm to the ecosystem that has already been done, environmentalists have applied the insights of phenomenology, in particular the idea of participatory consciousness, to rebuild the bridge to the world, knowing that we co-exist with, and within, a complex system of Being.

Again, probably the most important of the tools with which humans alter the world was, and is, language; we communicate skills and techniques as well as stories and literature. But there are other tools that can feel at least as familiar as words, and this was probably particularly

true before the era of out-sourced mass production. For a leather worker, the feel of an awl carefully piercing a hide to make an eyelet, or for a potter the glossy directness of wet clay spinning within his or her hands, are experiences that contain a stronger sense of the world than any verbal description. The smell of freshly turned earth at planting time has more content than any words that attempt to describe it.

I was a professional glass maker for more than thirty years, studying a tradition (at one time with a Venetian Master, Lino Tagliapietra, whose family has blown glass for the Venini company in Murano, Italy for centuries) that has not changed since it was first developed in Syria, around 100 BCE. The heat source and some of the materials have kept pace with technology, but the movements of the worker in front of the blast furnace and at the bench are the same as they have been for over two thousand years.

Looking at an ancient Roman piece, I can follow each move that was made in its creation, and I am usually stunned by the level of skill that such pieces required.

I studied, practiced, trained and worked to the point where the inside of my skull and the inside of my studio felt like one and the same space. I think that is very much what consciousness was like for glassblowers, other artisans, and virtually everyone other than the intelligentsia throughout the centuries leading up to industrialization. Karl Marx talked of the means of production as a determining factor of society, but it is not usually apparent to most members of the contemporary world that at one time we, in our own physicality, *were* the means of production. Phenomenology wasn't needed as a grounding philosophy; reality was the inside of the shop (or the field or the church).

Pre-Cartesian farmers probably had no problem with Mind/Matter Dualism. In the monotheistic medieval European world, God connected everything, with His infinite grace, from

the smallest stone and tiniest sparrow to the music of the Earth-encircling spheres. Pre-industrial Europe directly felt and manipulated the physical world, and the structure of the metaphysical world was definitively explained by the Catholic Church.

In other parts of the world, there are other structures and different shapes to what Merleau-Ponty and Conforti call fields of consciousness. Because of the enormous impact of modern technology, and because of the surface conformities brought about by colonialism and religious proselytization, in other parts of the world non-Western patterns are often found underneath a brittle crust. But they are still there: throughout South America and the Caribbean, for example, ostensibly Catholic societies have retained much of the culture and outlook that had indigenously developed over tens of thousands of years.

I visited a Catholic church outside of San Cristobal de las Casas, in the central highlands of Mexico near the border of Guatemala. The indigenous Lacondon people (directly descendent from the Mayans) lit candles for the Christian saints, but also covered the floor in a thick layer of pine needles. Fearing the loss of their soul into a camera lens, they were extremely hostile, and occasionally violent, to photographers. Church-goers brought eggs (and, curiously, Coca-Cola bottles) as offerings, and had built a small shrine in front of the church that was essentially a cave on legs, reflecting the old knowledge that the sacred realms of the gods were beneath the earth's surface.

In another example, throughout the Caribbean, and particularly in Haiti and Puerto Rico, Voodoo and Santeria still resonate with the ancient perceptions of the parts of Africa that came along with the Diaspora. The fields of consciousness that grew with the Fon, the Yoruba, and other groups of the Middle Passage are like palimpsests beneath a 17<sup>th</sup> century layer of Spanish

and French colonial Catholicism, which in turn was covered by today's layers of Third World poverty and First World tourism.

Recently, I visited Bali, Indonesia. Although it is primarily a Hindu island, there seems to be a deep reservoir of animism that probably goes back thousands of years. In this it is similar to parts of Mexico and the Caribbean. In Ubud, the art center of Bali, I was struck by how closely tied many of the Balinese were to their environment. There seemed an almost palpable spiritual connection to the earth, sea, and sky around them.

Bali is famous for the beautiful fabrics that they weave and dye (ikat and batik). Probably because of this, when I was invited to participate in an offering at a nearby shrine, I could not help but think of the Balinese as being sewn into their numinous perceptions. I wrote what follows shortly after this experience:

#### Morning in Bali

A very young girl helps her slightly older sister pull palm fronds from a tree on the edge of their back yard. They separate the fronds from the spine. *Stitch.* Carefully, they cut patterns on the edges of the fronds and start to fold them into origami-like small baskets, tying them together with short pieces of the spine. Using stripped-off, narrow pieces of the leaf, they make large knots, like macramé, that look like flowers. *Stitch.* They fill the baskets with rice and fruit, carefully arranging the food and palm frond flowers in the baskets. *Stitch.* Together, they take the baskets out to one of the shrines that, along with an outdoor meeting place, fill up most of the area behind the house. *Stitch.* They take some incense from the tray on which the baskets are arranged, light it, and arrange the smoking stick on the shrine along with one offering basket from each of them. The older sister dips her fingers in a small water bowl and flicks droplets onto the shrine, on to her sister, and on to herself. *Stitch.* This first offering is for the spirit that is paying attention to this particular spot on the island. The offerings and water-gesture are repeated two more times, the second set of baskets given to all the gods that watch over the entire island, and the third given to all the gods of the planet. *Stitch.*

They are now tied to the same place, the same island, and the same planet as their ancestors. Like a sewing needle through batik cloth, the ritual binds the children to the numinous time and space that has darted in and out of the consciousness of the Balinese for centuries.

The physical movements involved in this ceremony were practiced, deft, and done practically without thought. I tried, with the help of the older sister, to fold one of the simpler



baskets myself. Fairly quickly, they both started to laugh. They ended up moving my fingers for me (much like I have done when teaching glassblowing to beginners), and then taking away the odd-looking thing that I had twisted and poked together. With a few rearrangements and tugs, they somehow managed to make it into something that was presentable enough to offer at the shrine.

I have stressed body motion because I feel that there is a form of memory that binds consciousness to the world through learned repetitive movements. There is a discipline and assuredness that accompanies muscle-memory that is different from memorizing and reciting words. This is very evident in Balinese dance, where the hand movements take years of training (starting at a very young age) in order to become proficient. There are over 600 positions (mudras), with context-changing movements, that can be involved. Watching a skilled troupe of dancers is comparable to hearing a Gregorian chant: the impact is visceral, and a sense of the sacred dances from their fingers.

From my years as a glassblower, I know that highly skilled activities, when being performed, shape the way that a person perceives the world: professional athletes talk about a “zone” that they need to be in. For the Balinese dancers, and for the star athletes that are seen on television, the level of concentration needed to perform well is evident on their faces and in the precision and grace of their movements.

This level of physical performance is not limited to people who move their bodies well. The tongue, after all, is a muscle. Language is a physical performance that is usually taken for granted, but the learned movements that are involved in speaking are extremely complex.

Different languages form sounds in different ways and can use entirely different phonemes, and it may be that they result in differences in the way that we interact with the

world. Fluency in a language (at least for me, and it seems to be a general observation) is marked by dreaming in that language. This would seem to mean that muscle-memory is recorded deep in the psyche. There is a part of consciousness that is inextricably somatic, and the importance of the somatic psyche is a corollary of phenomenology. If our psyche is *in* the world, then our movements in the world should have psychic consequences. Roszak says that “. . . our real autobiography may be engraved in our muscle fiber more deeply than in our memory. The body remembers what the head willingly forgets; . . .” (275).

In this highly specialized and technologically advanced world, most people don't, physically, do very much other than those basic movements that get them from place to place. The somatic vocabulary of a cybernetic society is remarkably limited. Where once there was a hand-in-glove relationship between the psyche and nature, and the gloves that a person wore were individually “grown” to hold on to their idiosyncratic world, the gloves that most people have now are mass produced in distant factories. Few people know how, or often even where, they were produced.

They are gloves of inauthenticity, for the most part, and they don't hold up well.

Perhaps learning to dance, or making a table that doesn't wobble, are viable alternatives to psychotherapy. Unfortunately, as an accomplished master craftsman, I can say with authority that it just isn't that simple.

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