

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Heinz Demisch, *Erhobene Hände, Geschichte einer Gebärde in der bildenden Kunst*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 131, 1989, pp.85 [Trapp no.1989S.1]

Erhobene Hände, Geschichte einer Gebärde in der bildenden Kunst. By Heinz Demisch. 420 pp. + 437 b. & w. ill. + 50 figs. (Verlag Urachhaus, Stuttgart, 1984), DM168. ISBN 8-87838-405-X.

'Hands up', shouts the cop to the robber, to make sure his opponent cannot threaten him with a weapon. 'Look, mum, no hands!' calls the boy, showing off his feat of steering his bike without touching the handlebars. The theory of communication has made us familiar with the frequent need of assessing the meaning of signs in the light of excluded alternatives. Even though Structuralism may have exaggerated the ubiquity of this 'binary' principle, the study of meaning can never be the same it was before these insights were assimilated. The interpretation of gesture is a case in point. We understand the movements of our fellow men when we appreciate them in the context of action and inaction. Thus, many gestures of prayer can be seen as signs of submission, while certain gestures of power appear to indicate that there is no need for overt action. When we throw up our hands in terror we show that we are unable to act, and when we wave our arms in triumph we signal that the deed is done. It may well be questioned whether basic reactions of this kind can be said to have a history, any more than silence has. It is this consideration which renders the enterprise of the book under review so problematic. The gesture of 'uplifted hands' is exemplified in more than five hundred illustrations, ranging from pre-historic images to expressionist paintings and news photographs. More than 300 pages of text, 65 pages of notes and 17 pages of bibliography testify to the ambition and industry of the author, whose heavy tome has defeated at least one reader.

The central thesis of the book is the interpretation of the gesture as basically religious (*eine Ur-Gebärde des religiösen Lebens*) which can arise spontaneously at any moment of our existence: 'with outstretched arms the small child will jubilantly run towards his mother while frequently the soldier in the hour of death will fall to the ground with outstretched arms'. Need one gloss that the child reaches out to mother expecting a hug, while the dying man helplessly flails his arms of which he has lost control? In the concluding summary the author seeks to justify the circuitous path he has taken from divinities and atlas figures to worshippers of light, dancers, embodiments of vegetal and aquatic spirits, terror and joy, mourning, birth and death and back again to the supernatural world, indicating 'that the gesture of prayer points to the longing for eternal life'. 'Simplifying, one can say that all forms of the gesture relate to the phenomenon of life in a supernatural and timeless sense'.

Strangely enough the author does not appear to have asked himself to what extent images of art can be interpreted in terms of natural movement. The rigid postures of primitive drawings or figurines neither represent inaction nor action. Their extended extremities may, but need not be intended to convey a particular meaning. The book *Arrest and Movement* by H.A. Groenewegen-Frankfort (London, 1951) might here have been studied with profit.

But it is hardly necessary to pick out individual omissions in a book that appears to be so sadly flawed in its approach. It hardly matters, for instance, that the author perpetuates the myth of the heretical character of the so-called 'Bogumil tombstones' which Marian Wenzel has shown to rest on very suspect evidence. In any case a comparison between the author's bibliography and those contained in recent English publications must lead to the depressing conclusion that in such marginal fields news travels very slowly.

