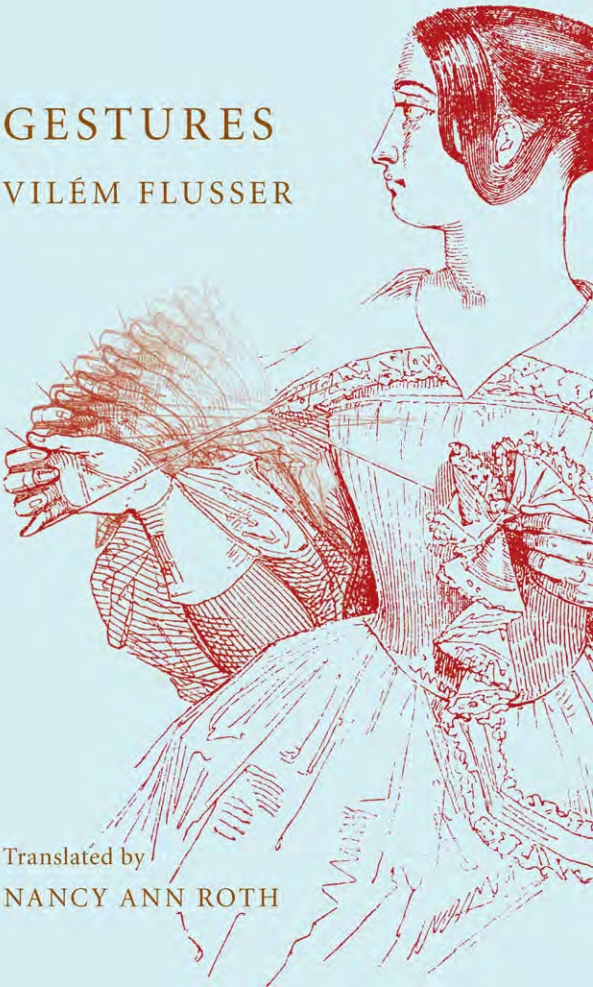
GESTURES

VILÉM FLUSSER



Translated by

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The Gesture of Searching

Our gestures are changing. We are in crisis. The following essay, which also serves as the last chapter of our attempt at a phenomenology of gestures, will claim that our crisis is basically a crisis in knowledge,[1] a crisis in our "gesture of searching." Visual evidence does not support this thesis. On the contrary, it appears that the gestures of researchers in laboratories, in libraries, in classrooms, are more or less the same as they were a hundred years ago, although other gestures, such as those of dancing, sitting down, or eating, are structured differently. The thesis presented here claims that all our gestures (our actions and thoughts) are structured as scientific research and that if our gestures are changing, it is because the gesture of searching is about to change.

It is obvious that technologies initiated through scientific research (i.e., the results of research, the positive discoveries) penetrate deeply into our way of life and our gestures. The technical manipulation of things in our environment (under way for the last two hundred years), like the technical manipulation of people and society (just beginning), seems to have been the cause of a thoroughgoing transformation of gestures since the Industrial Revolution. Still, gestures of technology are not really the models for all our gestures. For they themselves are modeled on the gesture of "pure" research. The gesture of searching, in which one does not know in advance what one is looking for, this testing gesture known as "scientific method," is the paradigm of all our gestures. It now holds the dominant position that religious ritual gesture did in the Middle Ages. At that time, every gesture—in art and politics as in economics and science—was shaped by religious ritual gesture. Every act (but also every thought,

desire, passive experience) was steeped in a religious atmosphere, in the structure of the religious gesture. At present, every gesture, including every ritual one, is shaped by the structure of scientific research. So much for the thesis of this essay.

Scientific research took up this central position without really trying, so to speak. There was never a struggle between rites and research (between religion and science) for the power to monopolize the modeling of gestures. Little by little, in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ritual gesture was simply abandoned, and the gesture of searching established itself in the empty place left behind. Actually the gesture of searching can't be the model for other gestures. It is not a search for anything that has gone missing. It searches for who knows what. It has no goal, no "value." It can't be an "authority." And yet it has become one. The position scientific research holds in our society is in conflict with research itself.

The gesture of searching is the gesture of the revolutionary bourgeois. The bourgeois works with his hands: he engages inanimate objects. He tries to do something with them. He does not consort with plants and animals; that's what farmers do. Nor does he manipulate people: that's what nobility and clergy do. The "practical" knowledge of the bourgeois is confined to inanimate objects. That is why modern research begins with astronomy and mechanics, disciplines that try to understand the movement of inanimate objects. That's obvious and yet surprising. For from an existential standpoint, these movements are not very interesting. The bourgeois revolution, which marks the origin of scientific research, is a revolution of interest.

Medieval interests were directed toward the life and death of human beings: toward the "soul." Augustine said, "Deum atque animam cognoscere cupisco. Nihil—nec plus? Nihil." (I wish to know God and the soul. Nothing more? Nothing.) This was the dominant interest for millennia. The structure of interests that controls the revolutionary bourgeois is different. He wishes to know "nature." Which nature? Neither the Judeo-Christian creation nor the Greek *physis*. Neither the "Holy Work" in which His will is revealed nor that of a cosmic organism in which each thing finds its place according to its fate. The research field of the revolutionary bourgeois is inanimate movements.

A field of little interest, then. What is being sought? Of course one can say that the search was for ways to manufacture tools and machines to subordinate inanimate objects to our will. That would be of interest because it would allow us to work less and to consume more. But to say it is to commit an anachronism. The revolutionary bourgeois did not set out to produce the Industrial Revolution. Those were conditions that arose, unexpectedly, two centuries later. His research was "pure" and disinterested. He turned his back on the interesting problems, leaving joy and suffering, injustice and war, love and hate, to such extrascientific disciplines as religion, politics, and the arts.

To turn away from problems that interest people so as to be involved with uninteresting objects is the "humanistic" gesture. For objects that are not interesting (with which human beings do not "engage") remain "at a distance." They are just objects, and a human being is their subject. He is in the realm of "transcendence" with respect to such available objects. So he can know them "objectively." Compared to things like stones and stars, a human being is like a god. Compared to things like cathedrals, diseases, and wars, he is not, for he is involved in these things: they have interest. "Objective" knowledge is the goal of humanism. In this knowledge, human beings take up the position of God. That is the "humanistic" gesture as well as the gesture of the bourgeois researcher.

But that is not the whole gesture. The movements of inanimate objects can be described mathematically; interesting problems cannot be to the same extent. To make mathematical—that is an old, and not a bourgeois, ideal. It was initially bound up with music making, magic, and conjuring. Mathematical expression was originally the gesture of playing lyres and flutes. Yet this gesture has changed. It has become a gesture of reading. For Islam, nature is a book written by God, and it is written in numbers (the Arabic *maktub* means "script" and "fate"). With the help of God, a human being can read it. Behind the confused numbers of nature, he will find a simple algorithm. The revolutionary bourgeois searches for the mathematical order behind the movements of inanimate objects in exactly such an "Islamic" form. His gesture of searching is also the gesture of deciphering. And it is this very aspect that has made his research "exact."

Let us summarize: the revolutionary bourgeoisie imposed its gesture

(the engagement with inanimate objects) on our society at some point in the course of the sixteenth century. In this way, it became the gesture of so-called pure research. In this way, a new sort of "nature" was discovered. And this nature permitted the search for an objective and exact knowledge. Human beings became the transcendent subjects of this nature. The gesture of the transcendent subject is the gesture of the natural sciences, and it has become the model for all our gestures. But this gesture is about to change. "Crisis."

The only surprising thing about it is that this crisis has come so late. For bourgeois nature has spread out and become more and more interesting. In the course of modernity, and roughly in this order, it has incorporated animate beings, the human mind, and society (biology, psychology, and sociology). Interesting things, that is. And it has become painfully obvious that this expansion of "nature" raises new questions about the gesture of "pure" research. Knowledge gained in biology, psychology, sociology, and economics (as well as in the so-called humanities) has shown itself to be neither very "objective" nor very "exact." The "pure" gesture of searching appears inadequate for dealing with such things. That became clear in a painful manner at least two centuries ago. Still, there was no crisis at that time, for the Industrial Revolution got in the way. This revolution proved how well the "pure" gesture of searching suited inanimate objects. But the Industrial Revolution is now digested, and the crisis of "pure" research is upon us. It threatens to be even more dangerous for being late.

It has now become obvious that objectivity and precision are "ideals" (of bourgeois ideology), that there are no such things as "pure intellect" or "absolute knowledge." That scientific research cannot be what the will of the bourgeoisie would have it be: the gesture of a transcendent intellect. And that it cannot end in the technical manipulation of an objective nature from the outside, as the bourgeois ideal would have it. Today, one notices to what mode of being science is condemned: it is the gesture of someone immersed in the world and interested in changing it to suit his needs, desires, and dreams. The crisis in the gesture of searching consists in being forced to notice it.

The gesture of searching for objective and exact knowledge is about to become impossible. Yet, just now, another type of gesture of searching is emerging.

A perceiving subject searches for objective understanding of a perceptible object by means of a gesture of adequation. This presumes that subject and object are separate entities that encounter one another in the course of the gesture. Scientific research is not "free of assumptions": this separation is its assumption, one whose difficulties have, it is true, been acknowledged at least since Descartes. No one understands how "understanding" becomes an equivalent for the thing it understands, or how a "thinker" can be equivalent to the thing thought about, and Descartes spoke of having recourse to God ("concursus Dei"). But acknowledgment of such basic problems did not inhibit researchers for centuries to come from eagerly pursuing the ideal of objectivity. Now the problem has become intractable.

At present, the gesture of searching is providing increasingly compelling evidence that subject and object are always interwoven. A subject is always the subject of some sort of object, and an object is always the object of some sort of subject; there is neither subject without object nor object without subject. This is not the perception of a subject encountering an object. It is an actual relationship from which subjective and objective poles can be abstracted. Subject and object are abstract extrapolations of a concrete relation. The "transcendental mind" and "objectively given world" are ideological concepts extrapolated from actual reality—reality we are and in which we are.

The gesture of searching itself shows it. In physics, it shows the extent to which the gesture of searching produces, defines, and changes the object under consideration. In psychology, it shows how forcefully the object under consideration produces, defines, and changes the researcher's gesture. And it shows this even more in sociology, economics, linguistics and related disciplines. There is neither an object that searching has not first turned into an object nor a subject that is not in search of something. To be an object means to be sought, and to be a subject means to search. The ideological concept of objectivity, whether "idealistic" or "realistic," obscures our access to the gesture of searching. It needs to be taken out of such contexts. Yet this will change the gesture's structure.

The bourgeois researcher approaches his object "without prejudice." He does not "evaluate." What a fine contradiction! The value of the "pure" researcher consists in permitting no values. This contradiction was always

recognized yet never kept researchers from searching for purity. Now, it does. For then, the gesture itself showed that it was a human act, the act of a living being immersed in the fullness of reality. No one can search without also wishing and suffering, without having "values." Perception is among other things passion, and passion is a form of perception. All of it happens in the fullness of human life, in its "being in the world." The gesture of a "pure," ethically neutral attitude is a fraudulent gesture. It is inhuman, an estrangement, a madness.

With the perception of inanimate objects, this estrangement is only epistemological. In such cases, it is just an error. But when it comes to other things (diseases, wars, injustices), this estrangement becomes criminal. The researcher who approaches society as if it were an ant colony, the technocrat who manipulates the economy as if it were a chess game, is a criminal. He maintains that, through objective perception, he rises above ideologies. He is in fact a victim of the ideology of objectivity. Technocracy is the form of government of bourgeois ideologues who would turn society into a mass that can be manipulated (into an inanimate object).

Technocracy is dangerous because it works. Society does in fact become an object if it is regarded from an ethically neutral position. It becomes an objectively perceptible and alterable apparatus, a human being an objectively perceptible and alterable functionary. Through statistics, five-year plans, growth curves, and futurology, society does in fact become an ant colony. But that is mad. So a society is not a society that interests us, a human being is not one that lives in the world with us. These days we can observe this madness at work. And we know that it is the result of "pure" research. The gesture of searching itself now shows that objectivity is criminal. The secret is out. Even this cannot in itself change the structure of this gesture, however. For by its very nature, it assimilates subject to object. It proceeds as though the object wanted to be grasped by the subject and the subject were in a position to grasp the object. The gesture consists of two strategies, that is, one "objective" and another "subjective."

From the subject's side, the strategy consists in avoiding value judgments and being programmed in advance in mathematics and logic. In this way, a thoroughly peculiar, suspicious subject arises, the "researcher." In literature, he appears as Frankenstein; in laboratories, as a scholar; and in history, as the case of Oppenheimer. From the object's side, the

strategy consists of separating a phenomenon from its concrete context by means of a definition, turning it into an object. This transformation of a phenomenon into an object is an operation performed in material and mental laboratories. So the song of a bird becomes an acoustic vibration, and pain becomes a dysfunction of the organism. Once the subject and object of research have been established in this way, the process of adequation begins. Here is a superficial description of the next gesture.

The researcher must first undergo a catharsis. He puts it out of his mind that someone is paying for this research, that he must either publish it or be ruined (publish or perish), that he will become famous if he discovers something, that his discovery could turn out to be good or bad for society, along with any other value-laden considerations. In this way, he achieves a clear conscience. Then he commits to memory logical and mathematical structures, along with certain propositions about previous scientific research. Then he approaches an object that has already been prepared for the purpose and tries to find out whether this object can be reconciled with the stored structures and propositions. He tries not to do violence to the object through his gesture; he allows the object to say yes or no to the suggested structures and propositions. This phase of the research is called "observation." If the object says yes, the structures and the proposition can be "confirmed by observation," and the object will be considered "explained." But real research begins only if the object says no. The researcher retracts one of the stored propositions and suggests another. The withdrawn proposition becomes a "hypothesis falsified by observation" and the newly proposed one an "operative hypothesis." This phase of the research is called "methodological doubt," and a sequence of propositions of this type is called "scientific progress."

The operative hypothesis (working hypothesis) is a research tool that can be applied many times. It can even serve to decontextualize phenomena that have not yet been prepared for research. Such phenomena are said to be "discovered objects." For this is the only way some objects, such as stars, biological species, or nuclear particles, could have been discovered, with the help of operative hypotheses. This is why the world of scientific research is always expanding. The expansion requires in turn that research branch out. That is then called the "progressive specialization" of scientific research.

Operative hypotheses generally have the logical and mathematical structure stored in the researcher's memory. So they can be divided into groups to see whether they are coherent. This phase of research is called "theory." The coherent groups of hypotheses, that is, the theories, are explanations of additional areas of the objective world. They have the advantage of being broadly conceived. But if even just one of their hypotheses is falsified by observations, the entire theory must be thrown out. This phase of research, which tries to undermine theories, is called "basic research." Falsified theories can be replaced with others that work "better," in the sense of being simpler and more comprehensive than the falsified ones. That is the famous "paradigm shift."

The gesture of searching, described only superficially here, has always been accompanied by a chorus of critical objections (through the philosophy of science). This chorus asks questions. What is the "truth" of scientific propositions, and is that a scientific or a philosophical question? Are theories more or less true than hypotheses? Is the logical and mathematical structure of propositions determined by the preprogramming of the subject or by the structure of the physical world, or how are these things related otherwise? These questions, and others of the same type, have never had a satisfactory answer. For they were not good questions, as is becoming clear now. All of them assume the separation of subject and object, as does the gesture itself. Yet it didn't matter that there was no answer. Technology was functioning, and that was an irrefutable pragmatic argument. Today our questions about the gesture of searching run in a different direction. How would the "pure" researcher, this suspicious subject, this Frankenstein, this specialist, be able to grasp reality at all? Aren't his propositions always just ideological abstractions? And is this context of objects of which the researcher speaks, separated from concrete reality, actually the world we know and wish to change? Is it not a fantastic, unimaginable world? Rather than finding something, hasn't the researcher lost everything? Is the whole of "progress" not madness?

It would seem that the pragmatic argument remains in force all the while, that technology functions superbly with inanimate objects. There is nothing surprising about it. For we do more or less transcend what is relevant to such objects. And this technology does function, for example, road bridges hold together more or less as intended. But with other things,

technology functions wonderfully only when the things have first been rendered inanimate. If dental bridges function as well as road bridges, for example, it is because the dentist treats the patient as inanimate material. It is in fact surprising that to have such a bridge, one is turned into an inanimate object. It may be that people are prepared to turn into inanimate objects for the sake of a well-built dental bridge. But it is not unconditionally desirable. And the pragmatic argument for technology begins to wobble.

We have lost our faith in this argument and in technology. Of course we have no doubt that the tangible world can be manipulated further through technology. But we believe that this world has its limits. There is no doubt that more and more ingenious technical frivolities can be contrived. The human body can be objectified and then controlled. The economy can be manipulated. The human mind can be programmed and so manipulated. Perhaps human beings can be fabricated. But there are two concerns. The first is whether this progressive objectification is not accelerating the loss of concrete reality. The second is whether this progressive objectification is interesting. These are existential doubts.

The gesture of searching raises epistemological, ethical, and existential doubts. It is false, criminal, and not very interesting. It must be changed, and with it all our gestures. For it is the model for all our gestures. We find ourselves in crisis.

The foundation of the gesture of searching was the difference between subject and object, human being and world, I and it. We are about to abandon this foundation. This ontological revolution has epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic consequences. All our gestures are changing. For we no longer understand the world as an object of manipulation or human beings as subjects that manipulate. We begin to grasp the world as our environment, in which and with which we engage, and that engages with us, and we are beginning to see human beings, including their manipulation of objects, as a pantomime of the environment itself. We no longer believe that we make gestures but that we are gestures. This ontological revolution, which bourgeois (humanist) cosmology and anthropology dismissed through false problems of "idealism" and "realism," appears as a change in our gestures and, above all, as a change in the gesture of searching.

Research does not proceed from a hypothesis on one side and an observation on the other but from a concrete, full, living experience of being-in-the-world. It has nothing to do with empiricism in the seventeenth-century sense. It is rather an "aesthetic" starting point, if we translate *aistheton* with "experience" and *aisthesthai* with "to live through." Exactly like art, science, too, is a gesticulation, and that is to say a fraud, and with that the whole healthy middle-class distinction between the two collapses. But lived experience is not only aesthetic in the narrow sense of the term. It is also pleasure and suffering, and it creates values. The researcher who starts from such experience is trying to reach a value: freedom. He is trying to go beyond his limits. In this way, he does away with the ominous bourgeois distinctions between science, technology, and politics. For politics is concerned with freedom. The researcher ceases to be a "pure" subject to become a living person, that is, someone who lives epistemologically, ethically, and aesthetically all at once. So research changes its structure and alters the meaning of the concept "science." It is basically a revolution in interest.

Suddenly it becomes clear that the researcher is embedded in an environment that interests (matters to) him, both at close range and at a distance. There are aspects of the environment that interest him intensely and others that hardly touch him. The more an aspect of the environment interests the researcher, the more "real" it is for him. This intensity of interest, this "proximity," becomes a measure of how real it is. And from this mass, the structure, the "mathesis" of his research arises spontaneously, providing a map for orientation.

The researcher is located at the center of his environment. It doesn't matter where—wherever he is, that is the center. Many things are happening around him, some of them of great concern to him. They press themselves on him, and he throws himself toward them, projects himself against them. Toward the horizon, the mass of events becomes sparser and less interesting. Nevertheless, the mass comes nearer, and the researcher moves toward the horizon. The dimension of "proximity" is therefore dynamic. Its dynamic is that of human life. In this dynamic structure, that is to say, in his life, the researcher seeks his way in the direction of his horizon.

As a result, the concept "theory" changes its meaning in a revolutionary

way. For the ancients, "theory" was a contemplative examination of eternal forms. For the bourgeois, it was a group of coherent hypotheses. In the present, theory is becoming a strategy for being-alive-in-the-world. The contemporary researcher, the contemporary theoretician, measures the nearness of the environment, but neither to observe its form nor to hypothetically explain it. It is rather to transform the approaching possibilities into freedom. Even in its theoretical aspect, the gesture of searching is once again becoming a gesture of living.

Proximity is a dimension completely different from the "centimeters per second" measurement of bourgeois research. It does not measure intervals between objects. The "centimeters per second" that separate me from the dentist for whom I am waiting are not those that separate me from my son who expects to meet me. Proximity is certainly related to "centimeters per second," but the first makes the second existentially relevant. Proximity measures my hope, my fear, my plans. It measures my beckoning to the distance, which is to say, that which is meant by the prefix *tele-*.

But this proximity is by no means "subjective." The contemporary researcher is no solipsistic subject wanting to rise above the world. Others are always in the world with him. They, too, measure their environments by proximity. And inasmuch as these environments are bound to mine, these various measurements, too, mutually affect one another. We measure together. So research becomes dialogic. Proximity is an intersubjective dimension. It measures the being I share with others in the world. I encounter others spontaneously in the course of researching my environment. They are more or less close to me, more or less interesting. I must apply the measure of proximity to others. But if I meet them, we can then measure together. So the gesture of searching once again becomes a gesture in search of others.

That lends research a "progressive" character, completely different from bourgeois "progress." Bourgeois research is a discourse whose utopian goal lies in an increasingly objective perception of the world. At present, research is turning into a dialogue whose utopian goal is an increasingly intersubjective perception of our living conditions. The utopian result of bourgeois research is a technology that manipulates the whole objective world. At present, the utopian result of research consists of the optimal

transformation of living conditions to bring possibilities closer: telematics. So there is no linear progress for this kind of research. Progress is rather the approach to one another with the purpose of gathering shared possibilities.

That demands a change of models as well. For bourgeois research, time was modeled as a river, flowing from the past through an imaginary point called the "present" into the future. And the model of space was an empty box, its center fixed by convention and its axes lost in infinity. Today we are forced to develop an entirely different model for the environment. We can no longer accept a division between time and space. The center of our model is the present, and the present is here and now, where we are. Events press in from all sides toward the present, and so all sides are the future. But all sides are equally the space of events. Present and future therefore represent space-time concepts. As for the past, it is no longer a temporal dimension on the same level as present and future. In our model, the past is an aspect of the present that may be accessible in the form of remembering or hidden in the form of forgetting. Remembering and forgetting are space-time concepts as well.

We can see that the new model, coming from a change in the gesture of searching, refers back to the gesture itself. This becomes clear in the context of historical research. We can no longer reconcile historical events with the bourgeois arithmetic scale of measurement. That is a scale divided into years, centuries, and geological epochs, whose degree zero is lost in the void of the past and which ends in the present. We need to set up a logarithmic scale for historical events whose degree zero is in the present and whose divisions become finer and more indistinct the closer they get to the void of remembering and forgetting. This means that we can no longer explain the present through the past, for the present is our starting point. For us, the present no longer opens onto the past; it opens toward the future. For us, the direction of the flow of events no longer passes from the past to the future but from the future toward the present. It means that our gesture of searching is no longer directed downward in the bourgeois sense. It is not digging.

Of course, the change in the model changes the gesture of searching in all its parameters, the physical as well as the psychological, the sociological as well as the economic. But the most revolutionary aspect of this change becomes apparent in the gesture's historical parameter. We can no longer

project the past into the future using developmental curves, statistics, and futurological predictions. In our model, the flow of time runs against this kind of projection. We no longer project the past into the future; rather, we project ourselves. That is what best characterizes the new structure of the gesture of searching: it is a projection of itself into a future pressing in from all sides, a projection of scenarios into the future. So the gesture of searching has become human: as if with the long arms of apes, we swing wide again, drawing consequences from the inconsequential.

Our gestures are about to change. That is to say that our way of being is about to be transformed. We are facing a slow and painful crisis. Many of our gestures still have the traditional structure. Others are surprising and so sometimes repulsive. The new is always monstrous. We find it difficult to orient ourselves amid this diversity of old and new gestures. For it is not just among others that they can be observed; we ourselves gesture in this contradictory way. Our crisis is not just on the outside. In the strict sense of the word, it is ours.

But an orientation is possible. For the gesture of searching is the model for all our gestures. In keeping with the thesis presented here, the painful and complex transformation in this gesture underpins alternations in all our other gestures. The transformation can be observed in all areas of research, in physics as well as in biology, in the economy as well as in archaeology. It basically concerns not so much a methodological as an ontological revolution. A different formulation may be preferable: it concerns a new faith that struggles to arise. That is why our gestures are changing; our reality is in transformation. We no longer believe that the objective world is reality, and that it is the antithesis of the human mind. We are starting to believe that reality is the fact that we exist with others in the world. But isn't this belief in the other a new form of the old Judeo-Christian and even "humanist" and Marxist belief? Of course. But that is not what is interesting. What is interesting is the concern with a new form. That the new form is in fact what is interesting can be observed by watching how the gesture of searching is currently changing, from digging down for reasons to reaching out broadly for attractive possibilities.

The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe

1. The word *Negerkunst* might be translated as "black" or "African" art. As becomes clear in the remainder of the essay, in any case, the analysis relies on Flusser's experience of art forms practiced in Brazil among people of African and European descent.

The Gesture of Telephoning

1. The German is *pathetischste,* literally, "the most pathetic."

The Gesture of Searching

1. The word *Wissenschaft* is most often translated as "science." In this context, however, it takes on associations with an older, broader, and more literal meaning, a "condition of knowing."

Appendix

1. *Innerlichkeit,* literally, "inwardness."