Metagestures

Carla Nappi, Dominic Pettman

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The Gesture of Making

Serge removed the old oven gloves that he stashed inside the electric meter box above the bicycle racks, put them over his stubby hands, and then yanked down on the sturdy chain which opened the rusty factory shutters. His heart was even heavier than the mechanism he was engaged with, as he knew this was the last time he would perform such an action. The factory had been ordered closed for several months, as the owners brought in yet more machines; only this time, to replace almost all of the workers. (The bosses had offered Serge an ongoing supervisor position, for his loyalty to the company. He had since decided, however, to take the early pension, rather than see his friends in the bar after work, already drunk at 5pm, and him with factory shavings still on his clothes.) Serge was always the first to arrive at work, soon after dawn in summer, or hours before the sun peeped over the horizon, in winter. Today was the last day of August, so he did not have to light the gas lanterns. Sunlight streamed through the windows and skylights in dusty shafts, illuminating the way to Serge's modest office, in which he supervised all the various units of the factory. This building spread itself all along the southbank of the city's north canal; divided by departments, and linked by rickety footbridges, and plumbing
lines. The whole place creaked to itself. This was Serge’s favorite part of the day; before the others arrived, with their chatter and clatter and cigarette smoke. Before the morning whistle, the factory felt like a giant ship, happily lost at sea, with no human cargo but the foreman himself, with his thick moustache, and large, cow-like eyes.

Serge made himself some strong coffee inside a little pot on his desk, Turkish style, and then began the task he had been dreading all night. Indeed, he had been dreading it for months, as he could see it looming. This task was to make the final accounting of the various departments, so that the bosses could match the correct machines with the correct products. For this factory — like all such places — made things. It made a lot of different things: all of them rather hard to define or display. This factory specialized in all those items which were not tangible; and thus could not be sold in stores. Nevertheless, this conglomeration of workshops forged a decent living for all those who toiled therein, as Serge lived during those times when people happily, and unthinkingly, made things other than commodities; other than objects. Indeed these things were other than actual things. Before the recent Great Shift in manufacturing — precisely in this materialistic direction — most of the world’s products were not the kind that could be photographed, or carried upstairs, or thrown into the river. Rather they helped society move forward. They enabled the lubrication of human joints, minds, hearts, and spirits.

Serge spent longer than he usually did, whittling a pencil to a sharp point. So sharp, in fact, that the pencil could feasibly be used as a weapon. Perhaps it could be used to liberate the bad blood from the artery in the factory owner’s neck. But Serge was too old to entertain such vengeful scenarios for long. And so he wearily turned to the planning book, filled with technical diagrams, data logs, employee records, and other company miscellany. He then sipped his coffee, and began to review the different departments.

First was the unit responsible for making do. They were an especially enterprising group of young men and women, who
were the last to get the chop from the bosses, because they were so skilled at simply “getting by,” with whatever resources were available to them. For nearly a century now, this highly disciplined group had been making do; helping their fellow citizens brave storms, soldier on, and endure whatever conditions they found themselves in. Serge had always considered this department to be especially inspiring; and after attending their department meetings (as he attended all such official gatherings, around the factory), he always felt he could subsequently get by— with whatever came to hand. What was even more impressive, was the fact that this unit had been making do by hand, up until the past year, when they were obliged to start sharing their work space with a clattering rack of Do-Makers, imported from Brazil. Why the bosses were satisfied with the do made by these contraptions was beyond Serge, since the quality could not hold a candle to the original hand-made making do.

Next was the unit for making light. These meetings were Serge’s favorite, since they were full of levity, which helped balance his soul, prone as it was to melancholy. And no matter how gloomy the reports delivered to them from on high, this group had a wisecrack or a euphemism to make everyone laugh. What’s more, for a group of high-spirited lads and lasses, they were surprisingly efficient. No matter how many heavy situations were fed to them via the factory assembly line — two tons, four tons...sometimes even eight tons — they would manage to make light of it.

By instinct Serge moved his finger to flip to the next division, the group responsible for making fun; but then he remembered they had already been merged with the making light workers — and not without casualties. No matter how many times he had tried to explain the difference to the powers that be — that making light is a response to a difficult situation, whereas making fun is a more active type of action, effectively creating something from nothing — the bosses insisted that these two units were redundant. And so, henceforth, after the merger, the work of both teams were hampered by what the psychologists call “the narcissism of minor differences.” Productivity went down.
Far less fun was made (down even to war-time levels on some weeks). Predictably, however, those employees who were originally light-makers had an easier time of it. After all, they were used to taking the density out of things. In any case, both these subpopulations of the plant were in the habit of working with their hands. And they found a certain solidarity in teasing the witless new Make-Light machines, with their obnoxious fanning devices and slinking springs.

Next to be reviewed was the unit responsible for making time. They were masters of their craft; only six men and women in all, given how detailed and painstaking the work was, and how few people possessed the skills and training to engineer temporality properly. They could be spotted in the canteen by the special equipment that dangled by their necks from a thin gold chain: special optical instruments, designed to see the passing seconds more clearly; and special manipulative ones, to delicately force the flow of time into different directions; to create bubbles within its inevitable gushing, filled with a different kind of continuousness. Serge had a soft spot for Eva, the most experienced of the workers in this unit, whose nimble hands were so deft at creating spare moments for others, but seemingly incapable of making any for herself (at least when Serge asked if she had any, so that he could take her to dinner). Even after the discoveries of the great physicist from Switzerland, they managed to keep making time — as if they held a personal, yet collective, grudge against the alpine horologists — and would continue to forge many free moments, helping these then continue to evade the cold and greedy hands of the clock. Unfortunately, this unit had proven to be the most replaceable, as an entire bank of machines were wheeled in, using punch-cards and clicking calculations in order to cross-reference schedules and trajectories, in order to squeeze more time out of the world than this now obsolescent guild could imagine. The Time-Maker machines were terrifying in their quiet and smug efficiency; as if creating more time than Mother Nature had intended, simply to make more drudge work for others.
Serge took another sip of coffee, which had already become lukewarm. The task he was involved with, emblematic of the fate of the factory, made the coffee taste more bitter perhaps. He recalled a meeting with one of the owner’s underlings (but an overling to Serge), whose rather sneering face clearly didn't register any of the foreman’s rational protests to the radical new plans. Instead, this unfeeling technocrat watched Serge's hands—fluttering around the foreman’s immediate person, as he beseechingly made his case—with a look of disgust or horror; as if they were vampire bats, or squids, or some other kind of hideous creature. The expression seemed to be saying, “look here!...you are making your argument primarily with your hands. And this will no longer do. Henceforth, all things will be made with tools. Hands are now free to be clean, soft, and idle. Don’t you see?!” But Serge continued to insist that he could make the numbers all add up to the owner’s satisfaction. And yes; with his hands, if need be.

Serge rubbed his eyes of the unpleasant memory, and continued his desultory inventory. But he did so with increasing haste, as the morning whistle was imminent, and he felt the need to soon go stand on his usual iron perch, and watch the men and women arrive one last time. And so he flicked through the pages, making small pencil marks here and there, out of a habitual diligence.

These pages were dedicated to the unit charged with making noise. Surprisingly perhaps, this group forged their din without much fuss or noise of their own. It was as if they left their racket for the product itself. Those family folk, who lived across the canal from the factory, were happy when news broke that these workers in particular lost their jobs. Little did they know that the new Noise-Maker machines would carve up their sleep far more efficiently than those other conscientious men and women did. Soon it would be slicing its blades through not only their walls, but their eardrums. Most of these employees arrived already deaf, and yet they managed to make a whole menagerie of noises by hand; some really quite beautiful. Moreover, this department always got along famously with the unit tasked with
making trouble. An unruly lot, who — ironically — turned out to be the most helpful when it came to organizing the factory’s annual picnic. This division managed to make a great deal of trouble, however, for the machines which were installed to replace them; to the extent where the contraptions had to be relocated and bolted to the ceiling, where the workers could no longer tamper with them.

Serge looked at the names in the rest of the ledger: those units responsible for making up and making over — each department with its own special skills, protocols, codes, languages, and gestures. Curiously, the original owner — an affable visionary, who was the grandfather of the younger, and altogether less likeable, man, who was now putting them all out to pasture — did not see any reason to create a unit for making believe. He said: “The industrial age has no need of make-believe. Let us leave such things in the age of religion.” However, the new boss understood that the modern age still craved such a thing, and always would. As long as it wasn’t made by hand. Fantasies forged by machines was the future. He had said at much at a recent share-holders meeting, to great applause. Indeed, such highly engineered flights of fancy were to be largely co-produced by the brand new unit, which was to be unveiled to the press, with great fanfare, when the factory reopens in late Fall. There was much secrecy around this new unit; and Serge had kept his promise, not to tell any of his colleagues. (Although this was more out of distaste and tact, than any loyalty to the company, at this stage in the game.)

Serge shook his head, reading the name of this new department. It seemed cheap to him. It was as if the owner was trying to sell his wares to people who lived inside a talking picture, and not in the real world. Perhaps, if this unit’s intangible commodity were hand-made, he could imagine it would make people’s lives better. But as it was, having seen the cold and shining chrome of its impersonal source, he was not so sure. Nevertheless, Serge knew deep in his stomach that profits would rapidly rise. How could they not, with so few workers to pay? And now with such limited skills!...milling about the factory floor, hands
in their pockets, kicking machines every now and again, when they hiccup oil onto the ground.

Serge tapped the name of this secret new department with the stiff piece of rubber on top of his pencil, as if erasing the words would somehow erase the dismal destiny that had been planned for the factory.

*New Unit, #9 — Making Love*

But before he could take out his frustration with such a symbolic gesture, the morning whistle blew, and the sounds of human voices flooded into Serge’s stranded ark, for the last time at such volume.