

HANDSHAKE SOCIETY

Ben van den Berghe

PRESSURE AND PERSPECTIVE

A study in reciprocal palmistry

by Koen Sels

In back rooms, behind doors not fully closed so one can barely but still possibly catch a glimpse. In the public eye, on hellishly lit stages, catatonic limbs and grins as if reality itself is already photographic. During conventions, on round tables, two well dressed men bending over who-ever's sitting in between them to reach each other's hands, or everyone forming chains of double sleeved crossed arms. Under the table, secretly, simultaneously nodding. Exhibitionistic. Pornographic.



A and B are bending their elbows now, lifting their forearms, then stretching their arms just a bit again but still keeping them loosely crooked, in the meanwhile turning their wrists outward in opposite directions, adjusting their position to its negative. The palms of their hands are sweaty, but not equally so; only at the touch of their flesh will they discover who's wet and who seems dry but isn't quite because there's no such thing as a sweatless palm. Still rotating their wrists they lift thumbs that until now rested on index fingers, leaving a spot on the proximal phalange that's just a tad warmer than the rest of the finger. They open up their claws, fingers bending away from the metacarpals at different speeds, gradually opening up

a zone of intimacy of which some believe it tells personal histories. Hands now sliding over each other but not yet touching, going from almost straight to closing in and grasping, palms from stretched out and even to a crumpled leather. Two landscapes with swollen heights of fat and skin versus moist ravines, two planets landing on each other. Supinator tense, biceps reacting. The back of feminine B's hand undergoing the pressure of faster, heavier A's distal and intermediate phalanges. Anatomical snuff boxes make contact, get crushed. A damp vacuum, a pixelated gathering of human flesh, two highly active sets of ulnar, median and radial nerves. A blurring of skin tones. An already loosening knot of flesh.



The eight-armed entity swings its tentacles in several directions. Some hands only grab other hands for a brief but intense moment, some hold on too long, causing a hypodermic panic that can only be resolved with an uneasy withdrawal. People whose hands are being shook are shaking other's hands at the same time, and so on, ad infinitum. Everything is a disorganized play of vectors. Entangled fingers are skin coloured dots dispersed over the dimly lit ballroom, heaps of bony meat jumping up and down. Some smile and look each other in the eyes during handshakes, others stare a different direction, perhaps into a void, or at someone who is looking at a third party, or through a door behind which other, more secret handshakes are being shook. Some self-conscious hands do not shake

very well. They rest in pockets while the head belonging to the hand stares in fear, and thus tries to avert the possibility of physical contact. No. Not right now. But in the end these hands as well will have to leave their hiding places. Because people know where they are, and there's something out there that obliges hands to touch other hands. Finally, spread out over the ballroom, a network of touches is formed, then breaks up, then reconstitutes itself in a different form. The space now exists of negative and positive poles in an irregular pattern, electric sparks and radiant lines. The eight-armed entity is holding its head slanted and backwards, sardonically laughing at a joke. Its tentacles direct the ballroom. No dancing going on during these kinds of meetings.



Today is National Handshake Day, the 24th of June. A convention is being held where you can attend lectures on the history of the handshake and workshops on the do's and don'ts of handshaking. Visitors are testing their shaking skills, reading a brochure that uncovers the origins and essence of the handshake: 'Did you know that handshakes have been practiced since at least the 2nd century B.C.? Many researchers believe that the handshake originated in the Western World as a gesture of peace by demonstrating that the hands hold no weapons?' These are facts that call for celebration, but they apparently also evoke hostility. 'Hand shaking is so medieval. Let's end it', writes one Michael Arrington in an essay. He



proposes, among others, a 'fist touch' and 'a solid, respectful head nod' as alternatives.



We smash our fists against each other in faux slow motion. We lower and distort our voices, very slowly uttering 'Fffffiiiiiiiiisssssttttttttouchhhhhhh'. When our knuckles hit, we do a loud and almost infinitely stretched 'Ddrrrrttttssjjjj', with tremendous echoes. It's supposed to sound like a collision of metals that's so hard the air quivers and circles of red light appear, so drastic reality itself trembles and breaks up into shards. We never shake hands. We are pals.



X strongly believes he (X) is himself, and that there's a difference between who he (meaning X) is and what Y thinks he (X) is like. If Z would have been able to read X's minds, X's beliefs would have felt absolutely correct to him (Z). Alas Z does not read minds; he's nipping the foam of his (that is: Z's own) cappuccino. X thinks he doesn't really think too much about how to perform his upcoming handshake with Y. One is, after all, oneself. One completely falls back on one's own images of oneself. There are no metaphorical mirrors. Your hand ends where my hand begins. Hands are tight and fleshy, or bony and sturdy, or thin and fragile, or small and like

a cushion, or small and neat. They are merely material. And X is X, more than what meets the eye, but the feeling that he is doesn't soothe him anymore and he breaks into pieces, and Y is bound to feel in his hands that he does.



Howard and Cindy are whispering mean words through a small opening between their teeth. All the while they shake hands, almost crushing each other, so the dialogue comes out even more tense and spasmodic.

'Thanks for the invitation, Howard.'

'Get out, bitch.'

'What's that? You had cow shit, Howey?'

'Get. Out.'

'Because that would explain that foul smell that accompanies your words, wouldn't it?'

'Out, bitch. Now. Getout.'



In bars after work, collegiate. In offices, after meetings, with X walking to the other side of his (X's) desk to shake Y's hands on things agreed. At weddings and funerals, two queues proceeding in a bumpy rhythm, everyone defining everyone else's progress. By exits, after

years of 'good work'. In a windy park or on a bridge overlooking the river and grey skies, gratefully or empathically putting your left hand on top of joined right hands.



Slowly and sexual. Important. Acted.
Meaningless. Routines. Warm-hearted.
Eager. Mechanical. Epiphanic.

BEN VAN DEN BERGHE

geboren / born 1985 Belgien / Belgium
lebt und arbeitet / lives and works in Antwerpen / Antwerp

KOEN SELS

geboren / born 1982 Belgien / Belgium
lebt und arbeitet / lives and works in Antwerpen / Antwerp

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