

"THE EMPTY ROOM FEELS BIGGER"

ELISE HARMSSEN & NICOLA SMITH

13 May-10 June

Opening Thursday 19 May, 6-8pm

The Empty Room Feels Bigger

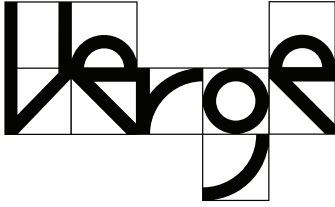
I'd given up on the project when the call came in. We love it, the voice on the other end of the line said, we just need a few rewrites. I open the file and come face to face with an obsolescent version of myself.

The Felicity theme song: *New Version of You*, with lyrics by JJ Abrams, a pop melody as blank and ordinary as unmotivated lens flare.

It took me back to that summer in the empty living room, watching Akerman. One of the films was *A Couch in New York*, with Juliette Binoche and William Hurt. It had been transferred onto VHS and squashed to fit the screen of a two hundred dollar Panasonic television from Harvey Norman replay, only they didn't own the replays then, just the plays.

The room didn't feel bigger, it was big. After I moved in I ripped up the floral carpet and left the floorboards naked. I nailed some legs onto an old door and made a table that I used for work, dyeing 16mm film, because that was the kind of work I was making then. It was like drawing but with the stakes taken out. There was no couch in the room only a couple of old brown lounge chairs with off-centre springs and hard wooden arms. A different version of me would've reupholstered them and sold them on for a profit but I was, then, the me who thought hours spent scratching into strips of celluloid a good use of time.

I can't remember the couch in *A Couch in New York*. I assume it's a real couch as well as a metaphorical one: the therapist's couch where Juliette Binoche finds her true vocation as therapist to William Hurt's intensely neurotic patients. What I remember are her sonorous mmms, a languishing interjection that stretches across the yawning gap between reality and delusion. A hum. A yes. A you're fine, you're fine.



The three rules for accurately reading body language:

1. Content

Read gestures like you read a sentence. Wait for the entire line before deciding on the meaning.

2. Congruence

Look for visual and vocal congruence.

3. Context

Read gestures in context. If someone is sitting in an open bus stop in winter with their arms and legs crossed, they're cold not defensive.

Probably, I know people who are defensive no matter the weather.

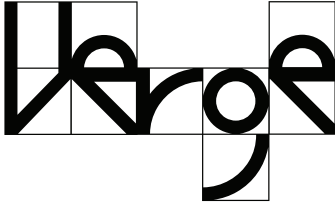
That evening I was sitting in the room at the back of the house waiting for her to call. Through the darkened glass I could see the room reflected back, sandwiched with the image of two lit windows, one blue and one orange. In the orange room a man sat at a table typing on a laptop. His left leg was hooked over his right. In the blue room a pile of washing sat beneath party bunting; happy birthday in shiny paper letters. When she finally called she sounded out of breath and distracted. You'll never guess who I just saw, she said. I couldn't. Kent Parker. The name like a zip. I thought he moved to New York, I said. He did, she said. But then he gave up art and now he's in finance. I wondered how you went from being an artist to a stock trader, a mirror Jeff Koons. I wondered if he lost all his client's money in pursuit of transcendental trades.

Gesture is a way of describing your body-language when you are moving. At its most obvious, moving your hands constitutes a gesture. However gesture can take many other forms including walking or a tilt of the head.

Illustrators: pointing, drawing in air, emphasising with gesture. Deepen and emphasise your message through gesture.

Regulators: nodding, smiling, leaning away, raising your eyebrows. Influence the speech of another person through gesture.

In Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, characters keep getting hooked on the gestures of life. People talk about the madeleine but there's also Vermeer's little patch of yellow, the light in the dining room at Balbec, the hawthorn blossom in Combray and 'the little phrase', the elusive melodic line that Swann pursues with all the intensity of obsessive love. His desire to hear the phrase again and again takes over his whole being. He imposes himself, wrangling invitations to parties where he's not wanted, all in the hopes of hearing the phrase. Hearing it he is in ecstasy and immediately after he yearns to hear it again.



It was as at the beginning of the world, as if there were only the two of them still on the earth, or rather in this world closed to all the rest, constructed by the logic of the creator, this world in which there would never be more than two of them: this sonata.

I tell the therapist about my own little phrase, a passage in a string quartet. I try to explain that what hooks me is not only the phrase but the way it's performed in a particular recording. In that recording, I explain, a recording of a live performance, the first violinist's bow catches before the change creating a tiny break in the sound, a momentary choke that I find unbearably affecting. I tell her I used to own the recording on CD but with the passing of technology I can no longer listen to it. She suggests Spotify. I shake my head. I'm trying to tell her it's a good thing I can no longer listen to the recording because listening to the phrase leaves me paralysed, unable to act. Whenever I hear it, I say, I'm overcome with the desire to give up on life and return to a state of pure being. The room is dark. The therapist is in shadow so it's like I'm speaking directly back to my own unconscious. What is this pull? I ask, the longing to unbecome to collapse back into the world like particles of sound. I don't know, she says. A god complex, perhaps?

The novilunium of woman is a source of countless disappointments for man which easily turn to bitterness, though they could equally well be a source of wisdom if they were understood. Naturally this is possible only if he is prepared to acknowledge his black sun, that is, his shadow.

Sometimes years go by and I don't finish anything. That's the title of a film I'm cutting together out of moments that happened years apart. The project can never be finished, it's designed that way so any time I choose to show you, what you're seeing exists just for now. The film has no authority, it avoids words and phrases that serve to strengthen its message. It is the matter of images in a stream of time. Later, it will be something else.

Sarinah Masukor