



scenes of silence[®]

An exhibition on non-verbal communication



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I Idea



**„The only way to learn is by encounter”,
Martin Buber, „I and you – The Dialog Principle”**

The exhibition **Scenes of Silence** wants to enable hearing people to gain access to the world of the deaf. The starting point is the real everyday situation of deaf people, whereby visitors enter a world of silence and are expected to communicate non-verbally.

The natural language of deaf people is sign language. It is a complete system of linguistic signals, visualizing thoughts and forming the basis of all social interaction. Sign language is the only human language that can cast a shadow.

The exhibition therefore wants to take this fascinating language as an opportunity to bring it out of its „social shadow” into the light of publicity, to make people aware of and open for a linguistic minority. It wants to eliminate prejudices and change our attitude.



In order to implement this idea, each visitor will be supplied with a device that cuts out all sound. He will be expected to hear with his eyes and talk with his hands. Visitors are encouraged to break down their linguistic barriers and make full use of their repertoire of non verbal expression and to communicate creatively by mime and gesture.

They will be supported by deaf employees who, by virtue of their experience and ability to sign, will be superior in terms of communication. Many deaf co-workers will be involved, showing the hearing visitors that their world is not poorer – merely different.

II Objectives



In defining the objectives, one has to differentiate between two aspects: getting across the actual contents of the exhibition with their effect upon the visitors, and the effect for the deaf employees.

Thus, within the concept of **Scenes of Silence**, the visitors can immerse themselves into the silent world of deaf people, daring to enter a new and strange reality. The following points can be conveyed to hearing visitors:

- Demonstration of sign language as a complete language system in its own right
- Raising an interest in the situation of deaf people
- A better understanding towards dealing with this linguistic minority
- Breaking down mental and social barriers
- A better understanding about different means of communication
- Awareness of the possibilities of non-verbal communication
- Stimulating a more accurate visual perception
- Stimulating an imaginative way of turning thoughts into non-verbal signals



Due to their involvement in the project, the deaf co-workers also receive valuable feedback, for here they are no longer in the position of "handicapped people", but within the exhibition they are in fact at an advantage compared to the hearing visitors. Thus, the labels »handicapped« and »not handicapped« are actually reversed. For the deaf employees this has the following effects:

- Presenting oneself within a positive context
- Self reflection regarding one's situation as a handicapped person
- A better understanding when dealing with hearing persons
- A job opportunity for unemployed people
- An opportunity to gain key qualifications
- An opportunity to learn new social skills
- Improved communication
- Improved self-esteem (empowerment)
- Contacts with employers
- Job perspectives

Scenes of Silence does not present deaf people as show objects or exotic creatures. **Scenes of Silence** is not an installation simulating deafness. **Scenes of Silence** is a platform where hearing and non-hearing people meet to show their willingness to think about social clichés and to overcome prejudices.

III Background



Scenes of Silence is based on the great success of Dialogue in the Dark (www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com), an installation where blind co-workers lead sighted visitors through a totally dark parcours. This concept and the experience gained from it is to be widened to include the situation of deaf people. Since 1989 **Dialogue in the Dark** has been shown in 19 countries and in 130 cities, employing a total of 4.000 blind persons who organized and guided four million visitors, making a wide public aware of the abilities of visually impaired people.

Scenes of Silence has been continuously developed and improved over the last ten years. First trials to open up the world of deaf people for the general public were carried out with the financial help of the Fonds Soziokultur and Aktion Mensch. In 1997 a first event was conducted in Frankfurt, which after four weeks was encouraging enough to continue with the concept. An invitation for **Dialogue in the Dark** to be included at the Theatre Festival at Avignon resulted in the contact with the International Visual Theatre Paris (IVT) whose Director Emanuelle Laborit is a renowned deaf actress.

A close cooperation followed with the French theatre director Thierry Roisin, who staged international productions in sign language with the IVT, as well as with Orna Cohen, curator and author of important exhibitions at the Cité des Sciences et l'Industrie, and so work on the project continued.



Cité des Sciences et l'Industrie (www.cite-sciences.fr) in Paris is one of Europe's most important venues for exhibitions and serves as an example for the presentation and conveying of ideas and knowledge. In the context of the European Year of Handicapped People **Scenes of Silence** aroused their interest, which resulted in a German-French cooperation. The IVT trained 25 deaf people for the project, which took place from 9th December 2003 until 25th April 2004, inviting the public into a world of silence. An internal evaluation voted **Scènes de Silence** (its French title) the best production since the centre opened nearly 20 years ago. The overwhelming echo in the media, the poignant entries in the visitors' books, the interest in sign language courses as well as many enquiries from other cities and, last not least, 25.000 visitors proved the power of the concept.

IV Scenes of Silence



The basic concept of **Scenes of Silence** consists of a series of circular rooms dedicated to the different aspects of non-verbal communication. The walls are covered with a light fabric, which not only absorbs sound but also neutralizes the rooms by providing a monochrome background. The visitor's visual concentration is not distracted, so that he can focus his attention on the deaf guide and the various situations within the exhibition. The panelling lets the existing room »dissolve«, giving the visitor the impression that he is moving in a »space apart« which he has to fill with life. The visitors will be fitted with highly effective individual soundproofing devices and they will be led through the exhibition in groups of 12 by a deaf guide.

Since it has to be assumed that the visitor is not familiar with sign language, scenes will be created in various rooms which can be conveyed and understood non-verbally. Each sequence is dedicated to one aspect of non-verbal communication: gesture, facial expression, body language and sign. The last station is a bar, where the newly acquired skills can be applied, supported by multimedial learning programs.

The exhibition is divided into the following sections:



- 1 Foyer
- 2 Invitation to silence
- 3 Dance of hands
- 4 Gallery of faces
- 5 Forum of figures
- 6 Play of signs
- 7 Bar of silence
- 8 Evaluation

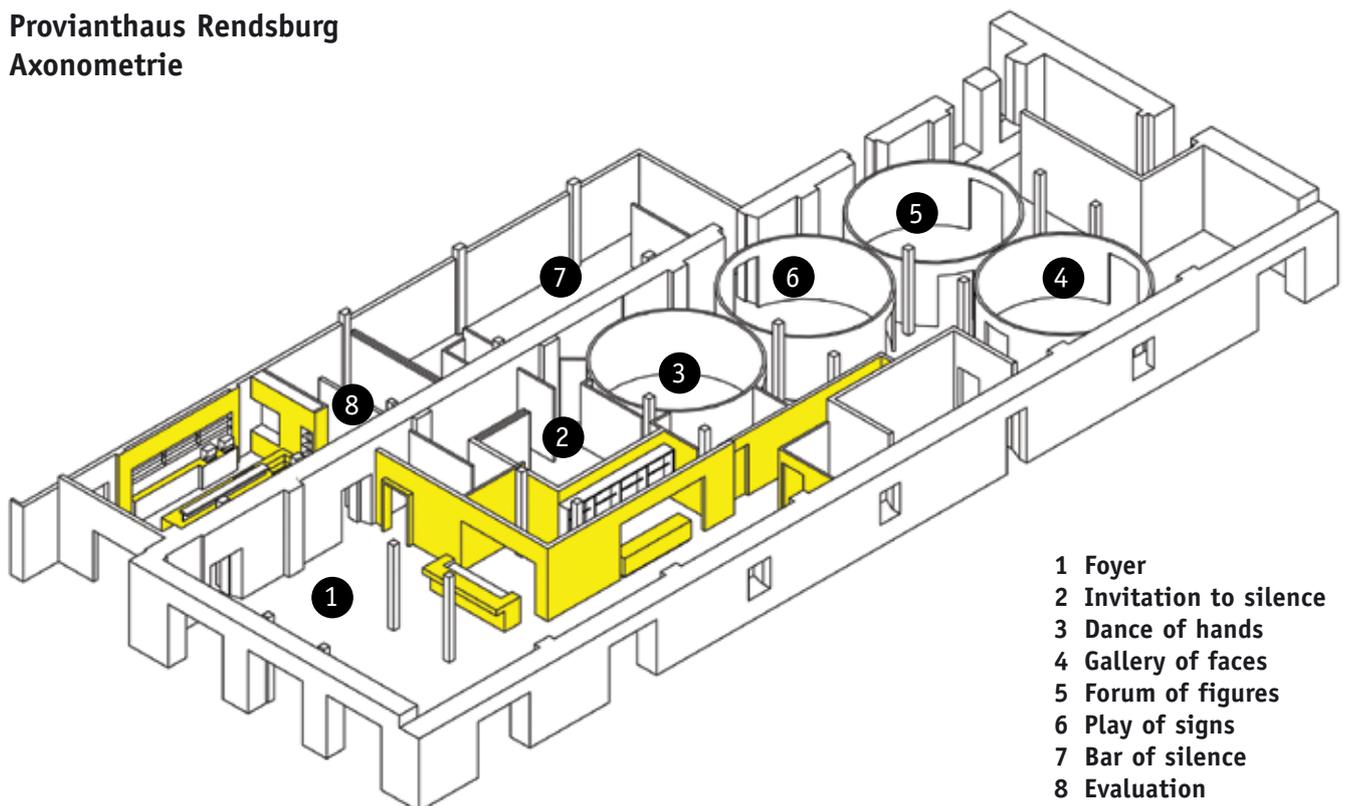


The exhibition in Rendsburg

Scenes of Silence is shown in Rendsburg, a city in northern Germany, 100 km north of Hamburg. The exhibition takes place for two years, in a listed building of the 18th century. Rendsburg is furthermore a centre for deaf people in Germany. Due to various institutions dealing with educational, professional and cultural concerns for deaf people, **Scenes of Silence** can generate synergies and is placed in an ideal environment.



**Proviathanhaus Rendsburg
Axonometrie**



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1 Foyer

The visitors enter the foyer and are divided into groups of up to 12 persons. They get a short briefing and then are taken over by their deaf guide, who introduces himself and leads the group to the next room, the **invitation to silence**.



2 Invitation to silence

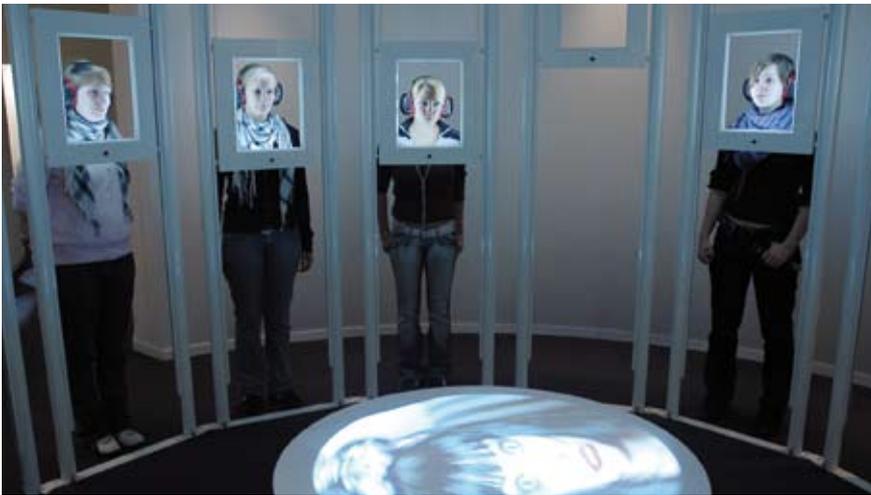
The visitors are confronted with a dark room full of noise and chaos. Rather disorientated, they follow their guide and position themselves in a circle. After a while, the noise dies down and the room is lit up.

Welcome to the world of silence. Individual soundproofing is distributed and the rules of the visit are conveyed by mime and gesture. The group continues and enters the next room, the **dance of hands**.



3 Dance of hands

The group stands around a round table. The deaf guide encourages the participants to loosen up and to explore the possibilities of manual expression by doing exercises with their hands and fingers. The hands cast a shadow on the table. After a while, figures start to emerge and the hands seem to dance. Suddenly there is a flash and the shadows freeze. The group has created a silhouette of shadows. Then everybody follows the guide into the **gallery of faces**.



4 Gallery of faces

Here the visitors find a rotunda of height adjustable frames. Each visitor stands behind a frame, adjusts the height and turns on the light which is supposed to help him concentrate on his face. Gradually, with the help of the deaf guide, the frozen faces of the visitors become alive and discover their possibilities of expression. While interacting the participants learn that moving their faces is an element of non verbal communication. After 10 minutes they enter the next station, the **forum of figures**.



5 Forum of figures

This room is dedicated to body language. The visitors sit in a circle and each person is given a card, inviting them to express certain moods in body language. Different feelings are written on the wall. Each participant tries to express one of them, the rest has to guess which one it is and point to the relevant word. Thus, each visitor will gradually express himself with his body.

By visiting the different rooms, the elements of non-verbal communication will be learned step by step, and in the next two rooms they will be combined. The first step of combining is the **play of signs**.



6 Play of signs

The group is divided into two teams who are to play against each other. On a wall with revolving pictures there are gestures of body parts, which are introduced and explained by the deaf guide.

The boards are then reversed and the corresponding pictures are shown, and immediately turned again. The play of signs begins. The guide points to a picture on the wall, and the group, by presenting the corresponding gesture, has to determine where the respective body part is hidden. The groups can communicate among themselves by signing and have to agree on their answer. After this contest the **bar of silence** is waiting for relaxation.



7 Bar of silence

Here the visitors can try out and complete their competence in non-verbal expression. Drinks and small snacks can be ordered by mime, gesture or signing. Multimedia terminals allow them to look up certain vocabulary and use it in communication.

Finally the visitors leave the bar, take off the soundproofing and enter the foyer.



8 Evaluation

Our experience in Paris has shown that after completing the parcours the visitors have a great need to talk about their experience. Usually there are many questions, and here the communication between hearing and non-hearing people can be continued via interpreters or by using a relay service.

V The Effect



The people employed in **Scenes of Silence** receive a range of new ideas for planning their further lives and careers. On the one hand, people who have been out of work for a long time or who have no work experience can gain confidence and experience within a safe working environment, which are prerequisites on the job market.

They will acquire key qualifications and gain social confidence. The role reversal in the exhibition will result in greater self confidence and the ability to stand up for oneself. The ability to communicate and work in a team, the need to assume responsibility, and the flexibility needed in dealing with a great variety of visitors are basic requirements in working for **Scenes of Silence** as well as the presentation of oneself, the solving of conflicts and to cope with routine. If co-workers feel satisfied with doing their job and can imagine to work for **Scenes of Silence** on a long term basis, they can be employed on a permanent basis and contribute to the success of this enterprise.

However, **Scenes of Silence** can also serve its co-workers as a turn-table to gain experience and skills for other jobs. The staff, employed and funded by support programmes, has a chance of getting to know the working environment and requirements of the general job market by being offered practical trainings in industry, administration, and other enterprises. This offers them a chance for orientation and to get their own ideas in line with reality.



Since companies usually are not too willing to employ handicapped people for practical job experience, an effective acquisition is necessary. The experience from Hamburg and Paris has shown that this kind of exhibition is an outstanding way to break down traditional behaviour patterns and avoidance tendencies. This results in a greater willingness to review personnel decisions and give handicapped people a chance. Problems like integration, support funding and suitable fields of occupation can be discussed and will no longer appear insurmountable, and so, gradually, integration into the first job market can be achieved.

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