



# scenes of silence<sup>®</sup>

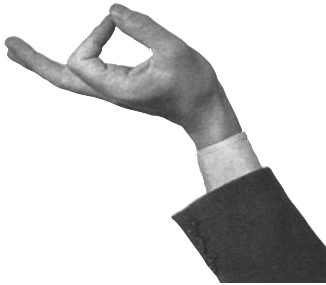
An exhibition featuring non-verbal communication



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# I The 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 form as an opportunity to bring it out of its "social shadows" into the light of publicity, to make people aware of and open for a linguistic minority. It wants to do away with 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.



In this they will be supported by deaf employees who, by virtue of their experience and ability to sign, will be more competent. Many deaf co-workers will be involved, showing the hearing visitors that their world is not necessarily poorer – but merely different.

## II The Objectives



In defining the objectives, one has to differentiate between two aspects: that of getting across the actual contents of the exhibition and their effect upon the visitors, and of 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 brought across to hearing visitors:

- A better understanding about different means of communication
- Stimulating an imaginative way of turning thoughts into nonverbal signals
- Stimulating a more acute visual perception
- Awakening an interest in the situation of deaf people
- Demonstration of sign language as a complete language system in its own right
- Breaking down mental and social barriers

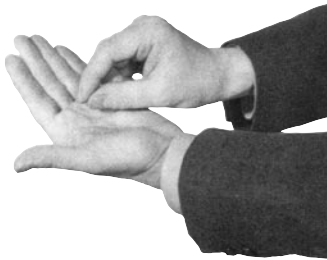
Through their involvement in the project, the deaf co-workers also receive valuable feedback, for here they are no longer in the position of "handicapped person", but within the exhibition they are in fact at an advantage compared to the hearing visitors. Thus, the labels "handicapped" and "non handicapped" are actually reversed. For the deaf employees this has the following effects:



- A job opportunity for the unemployed
- Experiencing oneself within a positive context
- Improved self-esteem
- A better understanding when dealing with hearing people
- An opportunity to learn new social skills
- An opportunity to gain key qualifications

**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 readiness to think about social clichés and overcome prejudices.

### III Background



**Scènes of Silence** is based on the great success of **Dialogue in the Dark** ([www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com](http://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 persons.

**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 financial help from the Fonds Soziokultur and Aktion Mensch. In 1997 a first event was staged 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 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](http://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 this institution signalled an interest in **Scenes of Silence**, which resulted in a German-French cooperation. Via IVT, 25 deaf persons were trained 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 has 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 courses for sign language as well as many enquiries from other cities gave proof for the power of the concept.

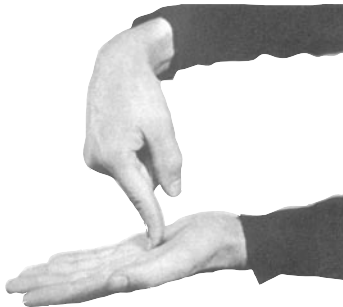
## IV Scenes of Silence



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 by providing a monochrome background also neutralizes the rooms. The visitor's visual concentration is not distracted, so that he can give his full attention to the deaf guide and the various situations within the exhibition. The panelling makes 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 sound proofing systems and they will be taken through the parcours 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 the various rooms which can be conveyed and understood non-verbally. Each sequence is dedicated to one aspect of non-verbal communication: signing, facial expression, body language and gesture. The last item is a bar, where the newly acquired skills will be used, supported by multimedial learning programmes.

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

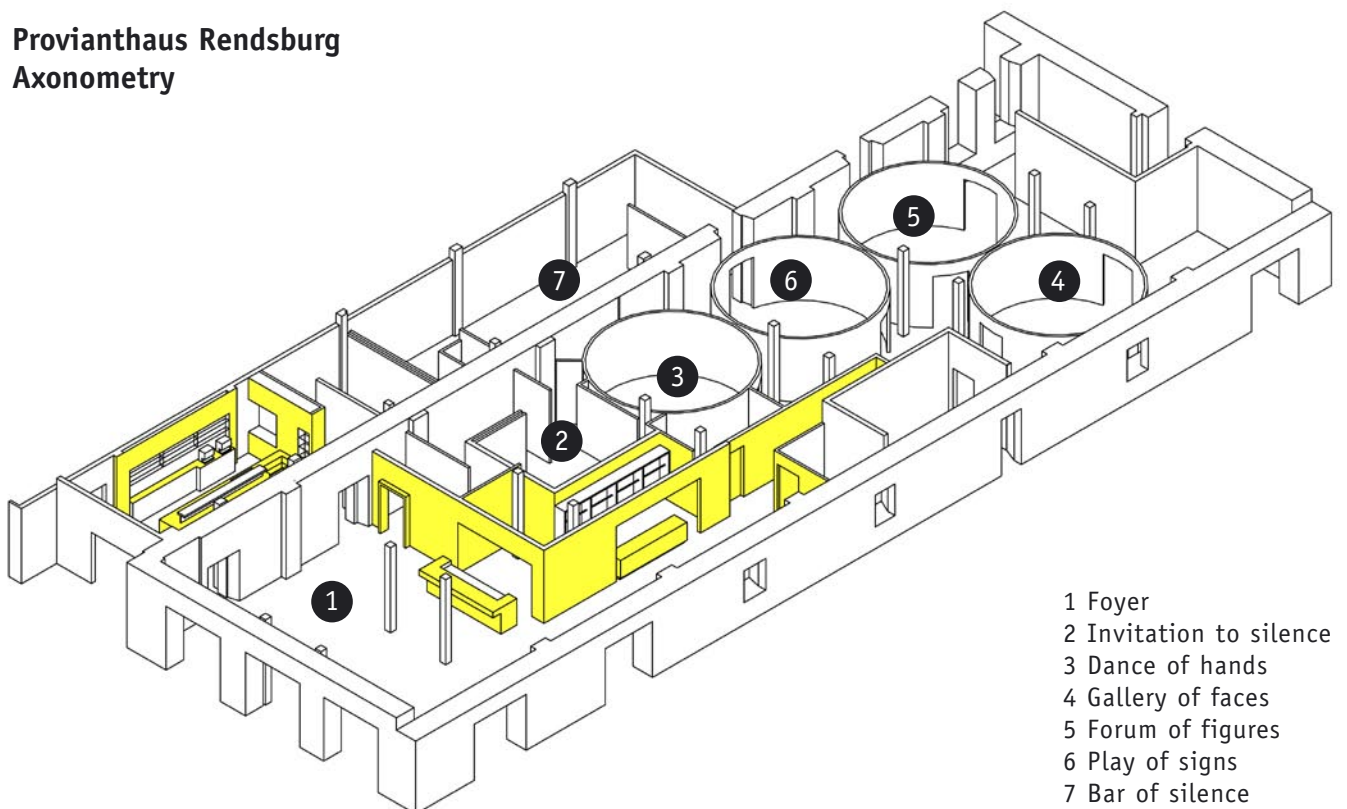


### **The exhibition in Rendsburg**

Scenes of Silence will be shown in Rendsburg, city in the north of Germany, 100 km from Hamburg. The exhibition will take place, for two years, in a listed building out of the 18th century. Rendsburg is furthermore the "capitol of the deaf" 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 ideal environment.



**Provianthaus Rendsburg**  
**Axonometry**



- 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





## 1 Foyer

The visitors enter the foyer and are divided into groups of maximally 12 persons. They get a short briefing and then are turned over to their deaf guide, who introduces him-/herself and leads the group to the next stage.



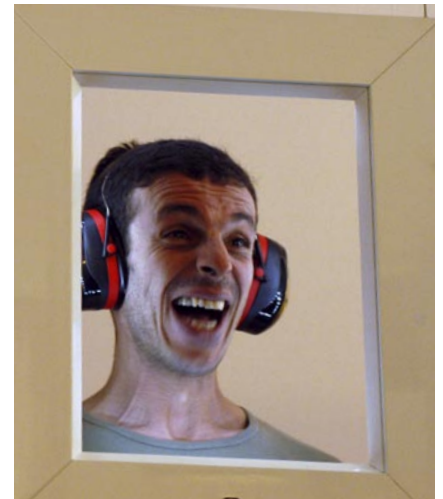
## 2 Invitation to silence

The visitors are confronted with a dark room full of noise and chaos. Rather desorientated, 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 sound proofing is distributed and the rules of the visit are conveyed by mime and gesture. The group continues and enters the next room.



### 3 Dance of hands

The group stands around a circular table. The deaf guide encourages the participants to loosen up and to explore with finger exercises the possibilities of manual expression. 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 shadow picture. 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 mobile and discover their possibilities of expression. By interaction the participants learn that their faces provide the grammar of non verbal communication. After 10 minutes they enter the next station.



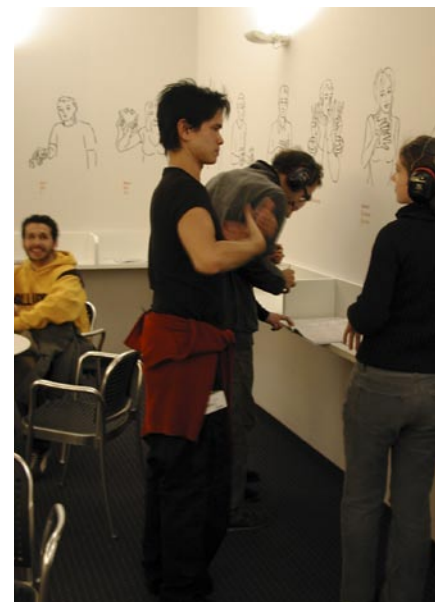
## 5 Forum of figures

This room is dedicated to body language. The visitors sit in a circle and each one is given a card, inviting them to express certain moods in body language. Different feelings are written on the wall, one of the participants is trying to express one of them, the rest will guess which one and point to the relevant word. Thus, each visitor will gradually express him/herself via his body. In this way, the different elements of non-verbal communication will gradually be learned, and in the next two rooms they will then be combined. The first stage 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 signed names of body parts, which are introduced and explained by the deaf guide. The boards are then reversed and the corresponding picture is shown, and immediately turned again. The play of signs begins. The guide points to a picture on the wall, and the group, by making the corresponding sign, has to determine where the shown body part is. The groups can communicate among themselves by signing and agree on their answer. After this contest the **Bar of Silence** is waiting.



## 7 Bar of silence

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 these in communication. Finally the visitors leave the bar, take off the noise protection 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 the experience. Usually there are many questions, and here the communication between hearing and non-hearing people can be continued via interpreters and a tele interpreter service.



## V The Effect



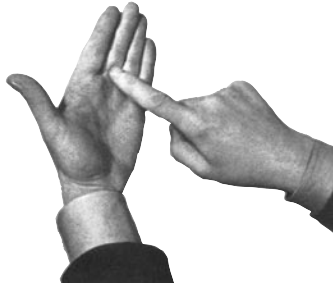
The people employed in **Scenes of Silence** receive a range of new ideas for planning their further lives and careers. On the one hand, people who have been out of work for a long time (or who have no work experience) can gain confidence and experience within a safe working environment, which are prerequisites in the first market. They will acquire key qualifications and gain in 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, as well as the flexibility needed in dealing with a great variety of visitors, the presentation of oneself, the solving of conflicts and cope with routine – all these are basic requirements in working for **Scenes of Silence**. If co-workers feel that their job gives them satisfaction and that they can see this as a long term job, 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 Turntable to gain experience and skills for other jobs. The members of staff, employed and funded by support programmes, have a chance, by being offered practicals in industry, in administration and other enterprises, of getting to know the working environment and requirements of the general job market. This offers them a chance for orientation and gets their own ideas in line with reality.



Since employers are usually not too willing to take on handicapped persons for practical job experience, an effective acquisition will be 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 reverse avoidance trends. This results in a greater readiness 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, the integration into the first job market may be achieved.

## VI Perspective



The general public is largely unaware of the life and situation of deaf people. However, there is a silent interest, judging by the success of films like "Beyond the Silence", "Land of Silence" and "Children of a Lesser God". Apart from the medical-documentary presentation of the Tinnitus League, however, the possibility of using an exhibition as a medium has never been considered as a presentation of hearing loss or hearing impairment.

So we are entering into an unknown territory and have a chance to create a unique project. We are building a social laboratory, using new media and methods to educate the public about the needs and the situation of handicapped people, thereby offering new cultural and educational possibilities in your environment.

As a combination of social engagement and job initiative, **Scenes of Silence** represents an important contribution to the advancement of tolerance towards minorities.





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