

L aNg U—aG e gAM e S

By Barbara Yoshida

Reprinted by kind permission of the author. This story was originally published in **Issue 2**.

UPDATE: *The author writes...* The film of Language Games has been doing well on the festival circuit -- several Best Women Empowerment awards -- and it was offered as part of a digital program at The Edinburgh Fringe. It all started with publication in Fleas on the Dog!

There is no Why We Like It introducing this play as the original publication predated the arrival of Drama Editor Janet Ehrlich Colson . The note 'The Playwright Speaks' was used as an introduction. The Eds.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

*I have always loved words and languages, and this one-act has given me the opportunity to explore gestural and non-linguistic forms of language as well as the philosophy of language; the importance of myth; and the contribution of animals to humankind's evolution. It started out as one scene in a larger work, but it was calling out to me to stand on its own. I turned to Alexander Stern's *The Fall of Language* for insight into Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's thoughts on immanent and designative language, or name and sign. I thought it would be amusing to see these super-intellectual guys playing Mah Jong, a game like gin rummy. You'd think they'd be playing chess or bridge, right? Shepard provides a good counterpoint to the philosophers' conceptual obscurity—his take on the origins of language is so down-to-earth. And then there's Beuys: he combines the immanent language of art with mythology. The hare was his animal—he even had a hare as a hood ornament on his car! Jane probably represents myself, always skeptical about “high-falutin’ mumbo-jumbo.” Stylistic influences include Tom Stoppard, Samuel Beckett (*I loved “Beckett by Brook”*), and *The Wooster Group*, although they might be more aspirational than evident in my piece. My gratitude goes to S. M. Dale, dramaturg; the photos of Joseph Beuys are by Arnaud Maggs; and the graffiti images are mine. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

LANGUAGE GAMES

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

-- Albert Einstein

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- WALTER Romantic and idealistic philosopher. Embraces mysticism as well as Western Marxism.
- LUDWIG A profound thinker, intense, and reserved. Enough ego and confidence to realize that he needn't assert his superiority as a philosopher.
- JANE Intelligent; a college graduate; not shy about sharing her opinions. She knows some philosophy but she's not a philosopher.
- PAUL An environmentalist, concerned with evolutionary theory.
- BEUYS Eccentric, egocentric, and confident. Guided by artistic concerns, a spiritual "calling," and an obligation to contribute to society and politics through art and teaching.

LANGUAGE GAMES

Four chairs around a card table. Face-down on the hard surface of the table, 36 Mah Jong tiles have been stacked up—18 on top of 18—to form a wall in front of each player. As the game is played, the audience can hear the tiles clicking but can't see them. As the lights come up, Ludwig, Walter, and Paul sit at the table. Walter is to Ludwig's right, and Paul is to Ludwig's left. Ludwig's chair is on wheels. Walter's chair is a rocking chair. Paul's chair allows him to lean way back. Jane enters and sits, on a stool that swivels, opposite Ludwig. After a moment, the players push their walls of tiles toward the center of the table to form a square.

WALTER

(Pronouncing the "W" in "Ludwig" as a "V".) Ludwig, it's your turn to be East Wind.

LUDWIG

(Throwing the dice in the middle of the square.) Rabbit's foot.

(Seeing the number on the dice, he counts from the right side of his wall, pulls the same number of tiles toward him, and puts them in his hand.)

(They move through this part of the game rapidly, following Ludwig's example, until each has thirteen tiles.)

LUDWIG

(Pronouncing the "W" in "Walter" as a "V".) You go next, Walter. You're South Wind.

WALTER

(Holding the dice close to his mouth and almost whispering to it.) Rabbit's foot.

(Walter throws the dice. He puts the number of tiles indicated by the dice into his hand.)

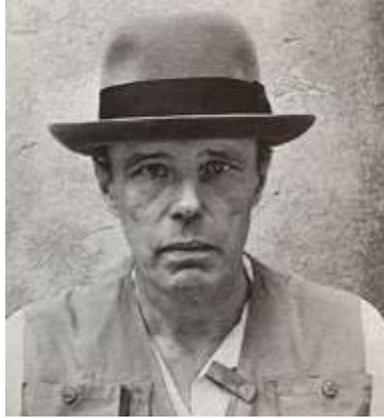
LUDWIG

Jane, we don't do concealed melds here. Otherwise, we play a pretty standard game.

JANE

(Passionately.) Rabbit's foot! *(She tosses the dice onto the table. She takes the number of tiles indicated by the dice.)*

(The ghost of Joseph Beuys appears behind Paul's chair. He wears a distinctive vest, hat, and pants, all in white, and his face, neck, and hands are covered in white make-up. (See attached photographs.) None of the players can see or hear him.)



(Paul takes the dice, then hesitates. Beuys takes a rabbit's foot from his pocket and dangles it over Paul's head. Paul rolls the dice.)

PAUL

Rabbit's foot!

(He takes the number of tiles indicated by the dice. Once all the players have thirteen tiles, Ludwig grabs an additional tile. He places it, face-up, in the center of the table, to create the discard pile.)

LUDWIG

Let the game begin!

(Walter takes one tile from the right side of his wall and discards a tile from his hand, face-up, in the center of the table. The players continue to take one tile at a time, in order—Jane next, then Paul, Ludwig, and Walter—drawing from either the discard pile or from their own walls. They discard a tile after drawing a tile.)

(From time to time, throughout the game, the players spin, rock, lean back, or wheel back and forth, but never at the same time and never while someone is speaking.)

LUDWIG

Now, where were we?

PAUL

Walter was just talking about what he calls nonsensuous similarities. Do you know what he means by that, Jane?

JANE

I think I do. To “tackle” a problem. To “needle” someone. To “worry” a loose thread. To “embroider” the truth.

WALTER

I contend that our ability to produce similarities and then to transform and extend them is what establishes the ties between what is said and what is meant.

JANE

(Jane could swivel on her stool here.) That sounds okay to me, Walter. What do you say, Paul?

PAUL

It’s designative language that gives us the ability to extend words this way—to “harbor” a fugitive, to “screw” someone, to “root out evil.”

WALTER

(Drawing a tile.) Paul, what’s your take on how we got from immanent language to designative language?

(Walter discards a tile. Jane picks it up.)

JANE

Pong!

WALTER

Already? Let’s see your meld, Jane.

(Jane places three tiles on the table, face-up. The other players lean in to look. While she is displaying her meld, Beuys crosses stage-right.)

BEUYS

(With conviction, facing out.) I am not a human being. I am a hare.

(Jane puts her meld back in her hand, discards a tile, and the game resumes, with Paul taking a tile from his wall.)

PAUL

If language has two kinds of meaning, immanent and designative, then our immanent engagement with the world came first. Primate ancestry gave early humans a well-developed vocal system and that led to speech. In order to refer to animals, they mimicked them, using human sounds. Then some sounds became names for those animals.

JANE

You buyin’ that, Walter?

WALTER

(Walter could rock here.) Name-giving establishes connections between language and objects. It's the communications of the concrete.

LUDWIG

But Paul hasn't told us how we got from mimicking animals to naming things.

JANE

(Defending Paul.) He can't know everything! He wasn't there!

(The players freeze, perhaps with a hand extended to draw a tile or while arranging tiles in their hand.)

BEUYS

(Authoritatively, to the players.) Language is not to be understood simply in terms of speech and words. Beyond language as verbalization lies a world of sound and form impulses, a language of primary sound without semantic content, but laden with completely different levels of information.

(They un-freeze and play resumes. They continue to draw and discard tiles, occasionally moving on their chairs.)

JANE

So then what happened, Paul?

PAUL

Early humans moved from an immanent relationship with the natural world to being removed from it. They became observers who named things arbitrarily. That's where designative language comes in.

LUDWIG

What prompted that?

PAUL

Once they left the trees and moved out into the savanna, their world was more competitive, more dangerous. In order to survive, they had to pay close attention to signs. They were both hunter and hunted now, and the hunt gave a jump-start to their intelligence. Signs contained information about fundamental relationships that could be grasped as abstract categories.

WALTER

What kind of signs?

LUDWIG

Like hoof prints?

PAUL

Exactly. It could be the prints of a young antelope that has been separated from the herd. Vultures circling. A bird feigning a broken wing and trying to lead the hunter away from her eggs. Feces, bones, nests, burrows, they all contained clues that could be read.

BEUYS

(Quickly interjecting.) The hare has a direct connection with the earth into which it burrows.

JANE

I'm with you, Paul. Keep going.

PAUL

These signs were not a description of an unseen animal, but knowledge about it. The signs represented it.

LUDWIG

You're coming at it from a different perspective than we philosophers do.

WALTER

But I can't necessarily disagree, can you?

(Beuys crosses behind Walter's chair and pats him on the head.)

LUDWIG

I'll reserve judgment for now.

JANE

Maybe you guys think names only described the shape of an animal. But I think the names of animals began to contain more information. Over time, each name was invested with layers of meaning, from experiences humans had with that animal. *(Back to Paul.)* And wouldn't you agree, that's part of our DNA?

PAUL

(Getting excited.) You could say that a language carries the cultural DNA of the people who speak it. Just like human DNA carries our racial memory—myths and folklore and the wisdom of the ancestors—cultural history is contained within the language they share.

WALTER

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in a certain sense take part in language, for it is in the nature of each to communicate its intellectual content.

JANE

(*Matching Paul's excitement.*) I get upset when I hear how we're losing indigenous languages every day. They say 7,000 languages are spoken today, but half are not being taught to children—they're becoming extinct! It's just as tragic as the loss of animal and plant species.

LUDWIG

Some indigenous languages are being taught in the schools again, did you know that? Gallic [*pronounced like "phallic"*] in Scotland, Mayan in Mexico, and Basque in Spain. I'm sure there are more. You're right—losing a language forever is just as much a cultural disaster as losing a species of bee or leopard or toad.

BEUYS

(*Crossing to Ludwig.*) Or hare!

PAUL

Like knowledge about animals, myths have been around since caveman days, and they remain in our collective unconscious.

JANE

Let me guess: animals play a key role in myths, right?

PAUL

You got it! The deeper meaning in myths is symbolized as animals. Animals are the mediators between myths and humans. The deeper meaning is almost incommunicable.

JANE

Except by intuition! Imagination!

PAUL

To convey an awareness or an experience that can't be communicated any other way, we create music, painting, poetry, or drama. We tell myths.

BEUYS

My art cannot be understood primarily by thinking. My art touches people who are in tune with my mode of thinking, but it is clear that people cannot understand my art by intellectual processes alone because no art can be experienced in that way.

WALTER

Are we still talking about immanent or designative language?

JANE

We're talking about language in its larger sense. Right, Ludwig?

LUDWIG

I do believe that language in its larger sense includes everything in our reality. It contains various human languages, non-human forms of communication, and gestures, as well as objects and events. That would include myths, as well. Walter?

WALTER

True. Language is all-pervasive.

JANE

(Drawing a tile.) Children are drawn to animals instinctively. They love stories about animals. And they hunger for opportunities to exercise their imaginations. Myths serve the human need to imagine. But if children only get myths through movies like “Star Wars,” they will never get a chance to picture how they would visualize those characters and settings. Even if they read the story later, it’s too late! *(Discarding a tile.)* Someone else’s images are already implanted in their minds.

PAUL

Reading stories at bedtime is good, because it’s right before the child goes to sleep. *(He gazes off into the distance.)* And the myths that the animals carry, the deeper meaning they symbolize, can be revealed in the child’s dreams.

LUDWIG

(Pause.) It’s your turn, Paul. Choose a tile.

(Paul chooses a tile.)

PAUL

Sorry, got distracted. *(Discarding a tile.)* Anyway, when humans started using designative language—it’s very exciting! *(He gets up and starts circling the table. One by one, as he passes behind them, players start moving in their chairs. They stop as he’s moving to the next person.)* Suddenly these abstract signs could be shared with those who had never seen the hind leg of an antelope gnawed by jackals.

(Walter draws a tile.)

(Gesticulating.) Time after time, people had to use their imaginations to picture things. More and more, the mind became filled with imagined, recollected, and dreamed forms.

BEUYS

(While Paul walks back to his chair and sits down.) The hare, and all other animals, was a catalyst of human evolution.

(Walter discards a tile. Jane draws a tile and discards one. Paul grabs it.)

PAUL

Chow!

JANE

Show us what you got, Paul.

(Paul lays down three tiles, face-up.)

LUDWIG

Aha! Your meld has a neutral tile, Paul, and I claim that tile. *(Ludwig takes the neutral tile from Paul's meld into his own hand and puts another tile into Paul's meld to complete it.)*

PAUL

You bastard!

(Beuys crosses behind Ludwig. He sticks his thumbs in his ears and waves his fingers, sticking his tongue out at Ludwig. Paul takes his meld, puts it back in his hand, and discards a tile.)

LUDWIG

Watch your language—that's a slur against my mother.

JANE

I don't know if that was immanent or designative, but it's clear that Paul didn't mean Ludwig's mother bore him out of wedlock.

(Beuys crosses behind Jane's chair. Taking the rabbit's foot from his pocket, he slowly drags it along her arm.)

BEUYS

(Moving behind Walter and facing Paul, while someone draws a tile and discards one.) I am a really horny hare!

PAUL

Well, designative words can be replaced by other words. Jane, you started this off by saying, "embroider the truth." In that phrase, we can replace "embroider" with "embellish." But immanent words cannot be replaced, any more than random, arbitrary notes can replace others in a melody without creating a whole different composition.

WALTER

Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think.

LUDWIG

Certainly, one painting can never be replaced by another. A picture tells me itself.

BEUYS

(As Jane chooses and discards a tile.) Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being.

WALTER

There is a continuity between language and art. Like paintings, music, and graffiti, language means itself.

(Paul discards a tile. Ludwig snatches it.)

LUDWIG

Kong! Back at ya, Paul, baby!

WALTER

Let's see your meld, Ludwig.

(Ludwig displays his meld of four tiles.)

JANE

Immanent language includes body language, graffiti, and interjections—what you call vocal gestures, Ludwig. Let's say I pinch you and you say "Ouch!" That's definitely immanent and expressive. Body language is equally expressive. And how about graffiti? It is so direct. *(Images of graffiti are projected.)*



LUDWIG

Ooh, I love graffiti! There's an immediate impact—an urgency—they're so visceral! Like a punch in the gut!

(Beuys takes a boxing stance behind Ludwig and punches the air a few times.)

WALTER

Okay, “Ouch!” and graffiti. What else?

JANE

Well, I did mention body language. (*She makes a circle with her left hand and pokes the index finger of her right hand a few times into and out of the circle.*) How’s that for immanent, expressive meaning?

(*Beuys laughs with surprise, giving Jane a thumbs-up.*)

WALTER

(*Laughing, he gives her the finger.*) Back at ya!

JANE

(*Laughing.*) Oh yeah? Here you go! (*She moves her right arm across her body and jerks her left arm up under it, violently, making a fist with her left hand.*)

LUDWIG

(*Getting up from his chair.*) You think you get the last word? (*Laughing.*) Take that!

(*Ludwig lifts his left leg and thrusts his right arm up under it, forcefully, making a fist with his right hand. He sits down again.*)

BEUYS

(*While Ludwig sits.*) I personally try to make information available not only in a written way. I try also to work with images, with fantasy, with jokes, with humor. (*Reaching his hand toward Walter’s nose.*) Got your nose! (*He shows his thumb between two fingers of his fist.*)

LUDWIG

Jane, what you don’t seem to get is this: The meaning is in the word.

JANE

(*Starting to spin more rapidly. Between spins, she faces Ludwig and speaks.*) I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re talking about.

LUDWIG

(*Wheeling back and forth.*) If I say the word *hare*, I picture an animal with long ears, one that leaps and quickly changes direction, and is seen in the wild.

BEUYS

(*During a pause, as a player chooses and discards a tile.*) The hare is an external organ of the human body. Its prodigious fertility, the way it digs in, the way it doubles back—it is dark and mysterious.

LUDWIG

(Starting to wheel back and forth more rapidly.) If I learn that the Spanish word for *hare* is *liebre*, I will imagine the same animal when I say *liebre*—it starts to sound like what it means. But each of those words, Jane, has its own meaning, apart from the animal that leaps. *Liebre* means *hare*, but not in the way *hare* does.

BEUYS

(During a pause, as a player chooses and discards a tile.) Even the dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.

JANE

(Spinning rapidly, between each sentence.) That doesn't make any sense! The word *hare* can have a different meaning, depending on someone's experience with the animal. Maybe the hare was encountered through myth, or through hunting. But for one individual, the words *hare* and *liebre* have got to have the same meaning.

WALTER

(Rocking back and forth more rapidly.) The experience of meaning is very important to me, the continuity between experiential and linguistic meaning.

JANE

(Spinning, then pausing to speak.) I can see that the meaning is in the word because we place it there, but how can a word can have its own meaning? *(She starts spinning again.)*

(Paul starts leaning back in his chair, again and again, more rapidly as the dialogue continues.)

LUDWIG

(Wheeling about rapidly.) Maybe Walter can make it clearer, Jane.

JANE

(Spinning rapidly.) I'm all ears!

BEUYS

(Quickly interjecting.) Wait just a minute! I'm the one with the ears!

WALTER

(Rocking more vigorously.) The meaning of a word is not something humans put into that word. Words embody the same spiritual essence as animals, plants, even inanimate objects. Everything was placed in the world by the Creator, with its own meaning, whether we can see it or not.

JANE

(Speaking between spins.) You're kidding, right?! What if somebody doesn't believe in God? This whole theory rests on believing the Creator put meaning into everything, even words. It's

just speculation. *(She stops.)* Does this really matter? People are sleeping on the street!
Children are getting shot in school!

(The other players are frenetically rocking, leaning back, or moving back and forth.)

BEUYS

(With conviction, crossing stage-left and facing out.) In places like universities, where everyone talks too rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear.

(Jane lays 13 tiles on the table. As she does so, the other players come to a halt.)

JANE

Mah Jong, muthafuckas!

BLACKOUT

[See next page: additional information and bios.]

Mah Jong is similar to gin rummy.

Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1926) was a German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic, and essayist. An eclectic thinker, he combined elements of German idealism, Romanticism, Western Marxism, and Jewish mysticism. He made enduring and influential contributions to aesthetic theory, literary criticism, and historical materialism. —Wikipedia

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1929) was an Austrian-British philosopher who worked primarily in logic, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. His *Philosophical Investigations* is recognized as one of the most important works of philosophy in the 20th century. —Wikipedia

Paul Shepard (1925 – 1996) was an American environmentalist and author best known for introducing the “Pleistocene paradigm” to deep ecology. His works established a normative framework in terms of evolutionary theory and developmental psychology. He offered a critique of sedentism/civilization and advocated modeling human lifestyles on those of nomadic, prehistoric humans. He explored the connections between domestication, language, and cognition. —Wikipedia

Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986) was a German Fluxus, happening, and performance artist as well as a painter, sculptor, medalist, installation artist, graphic artist, art theorist, and pedagogue. His work is grounded in concepts of humanism, social philosophy, and anthroposophy; it culminates in his “extended definition of art” and the idea of social sculpture as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, for which he claimed a creative, participatory role in shaping society and politics. His career was characterized by open public debates on a wide range of subjects including political, environmental, social, and long-term cultural trends. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential artists of the second half of the 20th century. —Wikipedia

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

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photos of Joseph Beuys are by Arnaud Maggs; and the graffiti images are mine. (Spacing is playwright's own.)

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Barbara Yoshida is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work as a painter, sculptor, and photographer has been exhibited throughout NYC, the U.S., and internationally. Her work with text has been on feminist websites, in print magazines, and in her book of megalithic standing stones, Moon Viewing. After taking Peculiar Works Project production and publicity photos for over a decade and editing too many grant applications, she began working as a dramaturg on projects such Planet X (Black Mountain College's [Re]Happening Festival), 2 Jane Jacobs (Cherry Lane Theater) Behind the Curtain (for the inaugural LES History Month), Son of Cock-Strong (La MaMa), Afterparty: The Rothko Studio (site-specifically in 222 Bowery), and Wallpaper (adapted from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic story). Most recently, she co-adapted America's first play, Androboros (Fraunces Tavern Museum), and is currently developing it into a contemporary musical. In addition to Language Games, other scripts include The Hare Trilogy and Joe & Bubble Boy, as well as an upcoming musical co-adaptation of The Black Crook. She reads constantly and loves words and languages. Other than English, she speaks French, Japanese, and Spanish (some more than others). She has served on the Board of PWP since its inception in 1993.*