

PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF GESTURE

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'The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them', Giorgio Agamben writes in his 'Notes on Gesture' (2000a, 58).¹ This special section of *Performance Philosophy* takes Agamben's statement as a starting point to rethink the nexus between gesture and ethics. While both are bound together here, their association is not evident at first sight. What is an ethical gesture if we assume that ethics concerns a good 'way of being, [...] a wise course of action', which is the Greek definition? Or, if we go with the moderns, when we take it that 'ethics is more or less synonymous with morality', with 'how subjective action and its representable intentions' relate to a 'universal Law', as in Immanuel Kant (Badiou 2001, 1–2)? What is such a gesture if we understand by ethics, with Alain Badiou, a specific relationship between subjective action and the extraordinariness of what this philosopher calls 'the event'—that is, a 'fidelity' to particular, radical experiences of art, science, politics, and love (67)? What might a Levinasian gestural ethics look like, one that is grounded in the immediacy of an 'opening to the Other' which disarms the reflexive subject (19)? Gesture has indeed been described as an opening of the body beyond itself, as something that is often, or perhaps even necessarily, relational. In her *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016), Adriana Cavarero develops a decidedly gestural ethic which is, as the title suggests, based on the posture of inclination: a bending of the body towards those who are vulnerable and dependent, and whose need of protection is as actual and given as that of a child. More generally, it has been argued that the body in gestures is 'attracted by the world, by an already existing object, by the achievement of a future action that I can already perceive', and so is suspended vis-à-vis its opposite at a distance that allows a specifically gestural 'tension' to 'flourish' (Blanga-Gubbay 2014, 125, 127). This implies that gesture often avoids touch—

although it may not exclude it—and thereby foregoes the possessiveness of the haptic (Mowat 2016).

The ethical is tied to action and acting, to the ways in which one conducts one's life.² Despite its diverse conceptualisations in the history of philosophy, current understanding of the topic in cultural theory tends to rest on a distinction between moral codes and ethics, which has found one of its most acute formulations in the twentieth century in Michel Foucault's genealogical project.³ James Laidlaw describes it succinctly:

Foucault distinguishes between what he calls moral codes—rules and regulations enforced by institutions such as schools, temples, families and so on, and which individuals might variously obey or resist—and ethics, which consists of the ways individuals might take themselves as the object of reflective action, adopting voluntary practices to shape and transform themselves in various ways [...]. Ethics, including these techniques of the self and projects of self-formation, are diagnostic of the moral domain. (2014, 29)

The gestural, by contrast, seems to come into its own where it departs from what is usually considered manifest action, where it is taken out of the functionality of an 'operational chain' (André Leroi-Gourhan) to assume expressive or pantomimic power. Expressivity, however, is only one element of gesturality, and functionality can be handled creatively. As Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson, and Øyvind Vågnes outline in the introduction to their recent collection *Gestures of Seeing* (2017), Vilém Flusser's influential theory of gestures distinguishes between 'good and bad gestures' in relation to how they interact with a given apparatus, for instance the camera.⁴ Bad gestures, in this setting, follow the camera's presumed rules; good gestures imply 'the active resistance of the photographer to become a function of the apparatus she uses. The gesture of photography, then, is an effort of resistance against the apparatus (the program or code) by using it in ways not intended or imagined by its inventors' (2). Agamben's expanded use of the term apparatus thus seems to be in (unacknowledged) conversation with Flusser. He writes: 'I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings'; and Flusser's effort of resistance returns in Agamben's 'hand-to-hand combat with apparatuses' to bring back to 'common use' that which 'remains captured and separated' in them (Agamben 2009, 14, 17). By differentiating 'good' from 'bad' modes of technical interaction, Flusser declares photography to be an ethical (and indeed also philosophical) practice.⁵ He conceives of gesture as a 'movement' of good usage that cannot be 'objectively explained by [its] purpose or function': it 'expresses the freedom to act and resist', in order to 'truly communicate' (Grønstad et al. 2017, 1). 'To understand a gesture defined in this way', Flusser (2014) argues, 'its "meaning" must be discovered. [...] The definition of gesture suggested here assumes that we are dealing with a symbolic movement' (3).

The gestures of photography will recede, in the following, behind those of film, dance, performance art, and philosophical discourse. But even if photography is not one of the central media in this enquiry, Flusser's account of it advances our argument by thinking together expression,

communication, and action: we *do things with gesture*. That which has been introduced above as gesture's abstaining from (haptic) acting must, then, be qualified. As the following contributions will amply demonstrate, gesture—whether it is considered within or beyond the paradigm of expression—does not evade the act; it possesses an agency that might be called *acting otherwise*. It is in the forms, kinetic qualities, temporal displacements, and calls for response which this acting-otherwise entails that a gestural ethics takes shape. In other words, gestures can act ethically as they en-act what they name, even if their naming must always remain contested. Carrie Noland (2009) argues that a gesture is a performative: 'it generates an acculturated body for others—and, at the same time, it is a performance—it engages the moving body in a temporality that is rememorative, present, and anticipatory all at once' (17).⁶ As Rebecca Schneider will show, this temporality of gestural performance is also reiterative and citational, bearing a capacity for bringing back that which has been enacted before, but also enabling reformulation and difference. Focusing on gesture's relationality, Schneider introduces a decidedly ethical slant to political discussions of reiteration.

Despite the fact that the contributors to this special section do not necessarily share the same definitions of gesture, a focus on the ethical potential of gestural acts as singular instances of physical, filmic and writerly performance unites their approaches. All of them tease out the ethics of the works and acts that they address: dances by Ted Shawn (Alexander Schwan) and Merce Cunningham (Carrie Noland), films by François Campaux (Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky), John Ford, George Stevens, and Clint Eastwood (Michael Minden), gestures of hail and of political protest (Rebecca Schneider), and gestures of philosophical criticism in Walter Benjamin (Mark Franko). Indeed, all authors also trace, what Laura Cull (2012) in her Deleuzian exploration of the immanent ethics of theatre calls, an ethical feeling of 'respectful attention' or 'attentive respect' in their various objects of enquiry (237).⁷ Gesture emerges more broadly as the gesturality of dance or as a gestural mode of thinking and writing, and more narrowly, in specific instances of expressive or functional movement, or of movement that hovers at the cusp between the narrative and the non-narrative.

The following will both introduce the argument of each of the contributors and continue to develop some of the overarching questions posed by our collaborative investigation of the ethics of gesture—what it might mean, what it might look like, and what it might do. Along the way, I will discuss two highly gestural video installations by Danish artist Joachim Koester, *The Place of Dead Roads* (2013) and *Maybe this act, this work, this thing* (2016), which serve as performed commentaries on the questions at hand.

Gesture, Potentiality, and Act in Agamben

To return to Flusser for a moment: His pictures are produced by a photographer who communicates a subjective position in the shape of a philosophical idea by leaving a kind of 'fingerprint' on a surface (2011, 286). In Flusser, it is precisely the communication of this intention which turns the activity of taking a photograph into a gesture. He thus subscribes to a theory of expression that Agamben in his understanding of gesture actively negates. Rethinking entirely 'our

traditional conception of expression' (2002, 318), Agamben's gestures do not have any circumscribed intention. What they communicate is 'communicability' (2000a, 59), the dwelling in language of human beings. Agamben's turn towards mediality in his 'Notes on Gesture' has been much discussed (see Grønstad and Gustafsson 2014), and will be productively reread and probed with regard to filmic, dancerly and critical performances in several of the following contributions. I will not therefore go back to the essay's argument in any detail here, but will highlight one of its ethical concerns: that it is the emptying-out or, with Simone Weil, 'decreation' (Saxton 2014, 62) of meaning that frees gesture to become a carrier of potentiality; which is, in Agamben, the condition for ethical choice. 'The point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize', he writes in *The Coming Community* (1993). 'This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done' (43).⁸

Where, then, is the place of the act in Agamben's ethics of potentiality? In the epilogue to *The Use of Bodies* (2016), the ninth and final instalment of the *Homo Sacer* project, entitled 'Toward a Theory of Destituent Potential', Agamben explains the relation between potential and act in Aristotle:

Potential and act are only two aspects of the process of the sovereign autoconstitution of Being, in which the act presupposes itself as potential and the latter is maintained in relation with the former through its own suspension, its own being able not to pass into act. And on the other hand, act is only a conservation and a 'salvation' (*soteria*)—in other words, an *Aufhebung*—of potential. (267)⁹

The operability of Aristotle's 'potential/act apparatus' (276), however, must be interrupted to reach the destituent potentiality towards which Agamben's epilogue is geared. What does Agamben mean by destituent potentiality? He uses the term 'destituent' for grasping the paradoxical nature of 'a force that, in its very constitution, deactivates the governmental machine' (2014, 65). This force does not simply destroy a power or a function, but liberates 'the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them' (2016, 273). He conjures up a situation where potential becomes a 'constitutively destituent' 'form-of-life' (277):¹⁰ a 'properly human life' (277) from which, quoting Spinoza, a 'joy' is born, where 'human beings contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting' (278). Agamben links destituent potentiality to a process of rendering inoperative or neutralising operations in order to expose them, which is echoed in the emptying-out of meaning that frees gesture to appear as such, and to become a carrier of potentiality. Such destitution attempts to think an act that does not act, or a non-act that acts: a (de)act(ivat)ing, perhaps; or an acting-otherwise.¹¹

The destituent is connected in Agamben to the advent of various kinds of newness. With reference to Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', the new emerges in the shape of the 'proletarian general strike' (269): "'on the destitution [*Entsetzung*] of the juridical order together with all the powers on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the destitution of state violence, a new historical epoch is founded"' (268). With reference to Christ's deposition from the cross, the new emerges in the shape of redemption: 'in the iconographic theme of the deposition [...] Christ has

entirely deposed the glory and regality that, in some way, still belong to him on the cross, and yet precisely and solely in this way, when he is still beyond passion and action, the complete destitution of his regality inaugurates the new age of the redeemed humanity' (277). With reference to the imagined politics that is intimated at the end of *The Use of Bodies*, destitution emerges, finally, in the shape of a 'constituted political system' that embraces within itself 'the action of a destituent potential', for which

[i]t would be necessary to think an element that, while remaining heterogeneous to the system, had the capacity to render decisions destitute, suspend them, and render them inoperative. [...] While the modern State pretends through the state of exception to include within itself the anarchic and anomic element it cannot do without, it is rather a question of displaying its radical heterogeneity in order to let it act as a purely destituent potential. (279)

The vocabulary of contemplation, exposure, and display that informs the preceding discussion leads us back, then, to the realm of the ethics of (gestural) art, which (together with politics, in Agamben) names 'the dimension in which works—linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social—are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to liberate the inoperativity that has remained imprisoned in them' (278). Inoperativity is associated with the energies of 'anomie' and of an 'anarchic potential' (273), that which is without law, command or origin; that is—to draw on Agamben's gestural understanding—without pre-given meaning.¹²

Gestural acting-otherwise certainly includes strategies that, by making given gestural routines inoperative, opens up a space for experiment, improvisation, reflection, and the new. While anarchic and anomic elements—from the resignification to the running wild of gestures—do appear in the following case studies, acting-otherwise is only partly characterised by such excessive forms of inoperability. Often, subtler ways of modifying the operative continuum will come to the fore, such as: the detaching of gestures of violence from their usual ends, as in Koester's *The Place of Dead Roads*; the delicate filmic defamiliarisation, through slow motion, of the process of applying a brush stroke, as Deuber-Mankowsky shows; or the rhythmical punctuation of the continuum of thought with caesuras in Benjamin's 'physiological' style, as traced by Franko. Noland's suggestion to consider gestural agency as 'differential rather than oppositional alone' is path-breaking here, as it allows us to study 'a whole range of deviations from normative behaviour—from slight variation to outright rejection—while simultaneously construing the *normative* as equally wide-ranging in its modes of acquisition' (2009, 3).

Gestural Acting-Otherwise

Alexander Schwan's essay 'Ethos Formula: Liturgy and Rhetorics in the Work of Ted Shawn' (2017) opens this special section by exploring forms of gestural normativity and 'spiritual vocation' that fall to the wayside in Agamben's gestural ethics. Addressing how such gestural normativity is not only acquired, but passed on through ethical attitudes 'encoded' in movement patterns, Schwan turns to the other side of Agamben's self-reflexive modernism, exemplified by Ted Shawn's

liturgical dances. With a head-nod in the direction of Aby Warburg's pathos formulae, Schwan suggests using the term 'ethos formulae' for postures and gestural routines which are 'motivated by decision-making rather than emotional content', while still retaining a relationship with a form-giving or task-setting law. Shawn's choreographic aesthetics—or in fact, ethics—is set within the greyzone between liturgy and modernist dance and thus proves to be a rich ground for ethos formulae. Influenced both by François Delsarte's nineteenth-century system of gestural meaning-making and his own Methodist background, Shawn's choreographic 'decisions' were guided by the gestural 'tasks' which they carried out, and the codifications which they performed. If gestures, as has been argued above, can act ethically as they en-act what they name, Shawn made sure that this 'naming' remained recognisable:

Standing upright and having his hands folded in front of his solar plexus, he opened his arms slowly and symmetrically, raising them to a point where his fingers still pointed to the ground and his open palms reached towards the audience in a gesture of devotion, greeting and blessing. (Schwan 2017, 32)

Moving from the gestural rhetoric of liturgy to that of the Western, forms of generic recognisability are at stake in Michael Minden's essay too. His 'Ethics, Gesture and the Western' (2017) begins with a brief discussion of Koester's *The Place of Dead Roads*, which I would like to address in more detail before turning to Minden's argument. Koester's installation presents a group of four androgynous dancers in nineteenth-century cowboy gear who are engaged in an apparently involuntary, almost feverishly obsessive pantomimic reenactment of the stock postures, gestures and moves of the Western genre: they eye and circle each other chins down, launch into chimeric gun battles, revolve as if lassoing, bounce as if riding a horse, convulse as if being hit by a bullet or even 'step-dance as if having their feet shot at in the saloon' (Börcsök 2017).

Sometimes, the recognisability of their moves is not so much a matter of the latter's mimetic shapes than of their 'effort quality', to use Rudolf von Laban's term: it is with abruptness that the dancers swing around or stop and start movement sequences, reminding us of the hypervigilance and the speedy reactions of gunfighters. One description speaks of a deconstruction of the Wild West's 'ritualised gestures' (Camden Arts Centre 2017), pointing up the fact that the choreography (which was created by Koester together with the striking performers Pieter Ampe, Boglárka Börcsök, Liz Kinoshita and Halla Olafsdottir) takes generic gestures out of their embedding in a plot structure. It also takes them out of their usual gender assignment, as each



*Image 1: Joachim Koester, The Place of Dead Roads (2013).
HD Video installation [33:30 min] (Boglárka Börcsök, Liz
Kinoshita, Halla Olafsdottir).*

dancer enacts a vocabulary that would be considered largely masculine within the genre-framework. At the same time, displacements of genre vocabulary across body parts produce cross-over genderings: the circling wrist movement of (a man's) lassoing returns in the undulations of a woman's hips. For Noland, gesturality consists not least in the fact that 'movements of all kinds can be abstracted from the projects to which they contingently belong', so that, 'accordingly, they can be studied as both discrete units of meaning *and* distinct instances of kinesis' (2009, 6). Koester's video installation incites this kind of study. Detached from their sites and props, from their usual operability and from narrative context, his gestures are performed in a space that is similarly abstracted, segmented by loosely mounted wooden walls which suggest make-shift cabins. The soundscape is denaturalised, amplifying the inhales and exhales of breath, the shuffling of feet, and muffled blows. A form of muffling also affects the field of the visual, with the dancers moving in and out of shallow zones of focus, and even moving in and out of camera frames, as if each medium shot defined a new stage-like square.

If the physical vocabulary of the Western is thus derealised and exposed in its dance-like gesturality, the mechanically repetitive performance of the dancers also exhibits the automatism with which gestural regimes enter bodies, especially when automatic reaction is a matter of survival in violent encounter. Koester refers to such automatisms when speaking of a gestural move that he and the performers called the 'electric gun', which they defined as an 'electric current connected to holding a gun which would cause the hand, the arm and sometimes the whole body to shake and vibrate' (Koester 2017b). Not only are bodies shown to be radically immersed in and driven by their motor actions, we also get the impression that many of their strategic moves are always already infected by the tremors of combat trauma. This automatic gesturality undergoes subtle changes in the course of the film, which is looped indefinitely in the gallery space. Sequences where the dancers perform the expected (if defamiliarised) score build up towards less painstakingly executed, less obviously scripted and more anarchic passages. Described by Koester as instances of a 'happy dance' that 'can be seen as an attempt to end the spell of historic violence' (2017a), these sequences constitute passages of unleashed gestural force, moments of gestural recovery which at the same time resemble gestural crises. Agamben's fairly clear-cut dialectic of gestures lost and regained (see Agamben 2000a) is complicated here: While the bodies of the performers are bound up within functioning representational patterns as long as they follow the guiding rhetoric of the Western, they are *performed by* the gestural vocabulary which they use; once they start *performing* their own gestures, they cease to signify.

In an essay on contemporary Flemish dance, Rudi Laermans (2010) describes such passages into non-signification with recourse to Agamben as a foregrounding of 'the body as a medium of non-verbal expressivity that becomes notable as such only when the will to express something is hampered by the very same body' (411).¹³ This aesthetic of 'gesturing dance' variously discloses 'the performing body as a failing medium of expressivity', one that paces out 'the very limits of the body as a medium of communication and representation, while still not giving up an underlying sense of humanism', or focuses on 'the borderline zone where physicality becomes expressive but does not yet fully represent something. The very presence of the moving body then crosses out its unavoidable "being in representation" when performing in front of an audience' (411–412). *The*

Place of Dead Roads belongs on this terrain of gesturing dance. Its choreographic oscillation between representationality and non-representation thrives in the liminal spaces between the operative and the inoperative, the scripted and the non-scripted. It derives its ethics from the attentiveness and the reflectiveness with which it crosses from one side to the other, or lingers on the various degrees of entanglement between the two.

It is important to note that the muscular reactions, which have entered the bodies' neurophysiological set-up and form their motoricity, are tied in Koester's video installation to a history of violence. By mimicking, rather than enacting, aggressive and defensive moves—'the performers never touch the revolvers they wear, despite their obsessive miming of the gestures of aiming, shooting etc', writes Minden (2017, 40)—by in fact turning functionally motivated movement into gestural movement, this history of violence is placed at one remove, and finally interrupted when the dancers slip into non-signification. What returns at this point is a gestural acting-otherwise that abstains from launching into the fully-fledged haptics of (violent) action. No longer-operational movement is put to new use as gesture. The ethico-critical impact of Koester's work, then, participates in a genealogy that goes back to Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. In her recent rereading of the second version of Benjamin's essay on Brecht's epic theatre, Judith Butler emphasises how gesturality, in this tradition, can be defined as abstention from violent deed. Butler focuses on a scene which Benjamin uses to explain how interruption becomes a precondition for the production of *gestus*, and thereby for discovering—in the sense of relearning to see, and possibly change—the 'conditions of life' (Benjamin 1982, 152). It is a scene from the stock elements of melodramatic middle-class family drama in which the sudden entrance of a stranger prevents the mother from hurling a bronze bust at her daughter, and the father from calling a policeman from the open window. 'Benjamin stops the scene quite suddenly', Butler (2015) writes,

giving us only the gesture, the frozen image, but not the act of violence itself. *The gesture, then, functions as the partial decomposition of the performative that arrests action before it can prove lethal.* Perhaps this kind of stalling, cutting, and stopping establishes an intervention into violence, an unexpected nonviolence through an indefinite stall, one effected by interruption and citation alike. In other words, the multiplication of gestures makes the violent act citable, brings it into relief as the structure of what people sometimes do, but does not quite do it—relinquishing the satisfaction of the complete act for what may prove to be an *ethos of restraint* [my emphasis], if not a critical act of nonviolence. (41)

Minden observes such an ethos of restraint in the John Wayne character's iconic lifting of his niece towards the end of John Ford's *The Searchers*, characterising it as a gestural moment 'in which a stronger person forbears from violence' and 'dominance' (42). While literally stalling or foregoing cruelty, moments like these also reflect back on gesturality as such, drawing attention to its foregoing of the (possibly violent) act. But Minden also addresses violence head-on. He joins Agamben in thinking about gesture as a formal frame for communicability, and he relates this to the similar function of genre. Even though few genres might be more 'generic' than the Western, Minden argues, genre here does not necessarily mean 'destiny' (Agamben 1993, 43). Therefore, it

does not have to be broken or 'subverted', but should be considered a potentiality within which there are spaces for ethical reflection. If genre thus provides the conditions for communicability—for telling a story—its exposure of its own narrative structures draws our attention to its intrinsic ethical potential. As Minden shows, such an instance of exposure—or 'exploitation' (46)—of genre at the climax of Clint Eastwood's 1992 *Unforgiven* opens violence to philosophical reflection by making 'explicit' and leaving 'unresolved' the Western's 'violent payback' formula (David Foster Wallace cited in Minden 2017, 48). To come back to Agamben's wording in *The Use of Bodies*, the incommensurate or exceptional quality of the violent bloodbath that takes place at the end of *Unforgiven*—its 'anarchic' and anomic nature—is removed from its inclusion/exclusion within the establishment of justice, to be displayed in 'its radical heterogeneity'. Its ethical appeal then consists in the fact that it acts indeed, despite its manifest nature, 'as a purely destituent potential' (2016, 279). Fulfilling with hyperbolic excess and thereby at once remaining within and deactivating generic demands, haptic violence itself becomes gestural.

Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky's essay 'The Paradox of a Gesture, Enlarged by the Distension of Time: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on a Slow-Motion Picture of Henri Matisse Painting' (2017) leaves Agamben behind, to address little-discussed gestural thinking in Lacan, in juxtaposition to Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin. Deuber-Mankowsky provides a close reading of Merleau-Ponty's and Lacan's reactions to a slow-motion sequence of Matisse painting, shot in 1946 by François Campaux. Addressing how Merleau-Ponty and Lacan read the minute hesitations of Matisse's hand, Deuber-Mankowsky argues for a gestural ethics that is rooted not so much in the phenomenological body (as in Merleau-Ponty) or in the self's implication in its foundational relationship to a 'gesturally' organic unconscious (our relationship 'to the organ' [62], as in Lacan), but in the experimental setting of the filmic medium: Benjamin's technologically enhanced 'room for play' (*Spielraum*). This room for play is characterised less by resistance against or combat with the apparatus, as in Flusser and Agamben, but by the latter's use as creative and heuristic tool. Theodor W. Adorno, Deuber-Mankowsky reminds us, took the technological dimension of this room for play seriously, and saw its influence on literature too. He criticized Benjamin for linking it, in his work on Kafka, to a Brechtian theatrical aesthetic rather than a cinematic one. Adorno himself thought of Kafka's gestures as akin to the aesthetic of the silent movie (see Adorno 2001, 70), situating them in the historical context of a modernist crisis of representation that was perceived to be marked, not least, by a 'dying away of language'. The specific animation or life-force of Kafka's gesturality, Deuber-Mankowsky argues, thus appears to be infused with the technological energy of media of reproduction, whose 'rhythm [...] reappears in gesture as a trembling' (63). Think, for instance, of the quivering élan of 'Desire to be a Red Indian' (*Wunsch, Indianer zu werden*), or of the larger oscillations of the two 'gestural' celluloid balls in 'Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor' (*Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle*), pointing up the dynamic (and material) quality of the filmic medium.¹⁴

Gesture, here, becomes one of the fulcra of media change, and it is its very embodiedness that allows it to do so. In the case of Kafka, literary gesturality achieves a seismographic quality, one which is reflective not only of the fact of a media revolution, but also of this revolution's not yet entirely firmed-up technicity; of a rhythm that is not yet always, and in every instance, effortless. The typically mechanical quality of the gestures that Kafka observes, that he notes down in his

diaries, and that serve as inspiration for the bodily conduct of his protagonists often gives rise to the impression that its functionality is in danger. In his Paris travel diary of 1911, Kafka (1964) describes a man and two women in a hotel lobby: the man's 'arm continually trembled as if at any moment he intended to put it out and escort the ladies through the centre of the crowd'. A few pages later we read about the less formal etiquette of the brothel visit—where a gap-toothed '[girl]' was '[a]nxious lest I should forget and take off my hat' (456, 459). In his diary accounts of social gestures, Kafka notices moments where codes of conduct draw special attention to themselves. They are not naturally enacted—or avoided—but affected by a specific kind of stress that bears on the potential of social automatisms to fall out of kilter at any moment, making inoperative too, perhaps, the conventionalised 'busy-bodyness' (Santner 2015, 102) which they sustain. Butler considers this a kind of psychosocial dysfunction with an implicit potential for transformation when she writes:

for the most part mechanical tends to be associated in popular language with automatic, yet every mechanism has within itself the possibility of not quite working as smoothly as it should. So though the mechanism is governed by the reproduction of social relations through the reproduction of the subject, there is sometimes "play" in the mechanism, which means that it can veer in a different relation, or it can, indeed, fall apart and fail to reproduce in the way for which it is designed. Most of Kafka's efforts to treat the mechanical foreground this constitutive possibility of breakdown, or malfunction. (Butler 2015, 23–24)

Technicity, in this context, is not just an indicator of shaky or alienating rationality, or of hyper-intellectual 'cybernetics', as in Merleau-Ponty. The technical is also defined by a 'productivity', as Deuber-Mankowsky writes, which 'revolutionizes not only perception, but the very relation between the subject and knowledge' (62).

Koester's video installation *Maybe this act, this work, this thing*, showcases this immense promise of a filmic room for play, but also a sense of limitation or malfunction in the shape of a certain gestural stress. *Maybe this act* is set in the very same turn-of-the-century media revolution, as the writing of Benjamin and Kafka. It features two dancers whose costumes indicate their association with the vaudeville tradition in a stylised way, reenacting rather than reconstructing the slightly worn glamour of pre-twentieth-century performance practitioners. Koester's film, the descriptive material argues,

conveys the advent of cinema through the bodies of vaudeville performers. Mimicking the apparatus of a new world that threatens their livelihood as stage actors, they simulate shutters of cameras and projectors, quivering electricity and the whirring celluloid. Their movements are amplified by the sounds of their heels hoofing, limbs shuffling and voices muttering with a sense of desperate urgency that echoes the cultural revolution that dawned with the film industry. (Camden Arts Centre 2017)

Despite this situation of endangerment, the choreography also conveys that the unfamiliar, different and expanded gesturality of the apparatus enters the body in creative ways; it is productive of a new kinaesthetic. *Maybe this act* is performed by Boglárka Börcsök and Zeina Hanna, and choreographed by Liz Kinoshita (both Börcsök and Kinoshita were also involved in *The Place of Dead Roads*). Börcsök's webpage includes an early draft by Koester that suggests a séance in which the performers become spiritualistic 'media' for the new medium of film: 'They are channeling the spirit(s) of the newly



Image 2: Joachim Koester, Maybe this act, this work, this thing (2016), HD Video installation [20:00], checkerboard floor. (Zeina Hanna)

developed cinematic apparatus, miming the machine, embodying the machine. As the spirit(s) enter they are transformed into cogs and wheels and moving belts. [...] Their movements are accompanied by occasional moaning; like squeaks of metal and sizzling of hard rubber' (Börcsök 2017). Over the course of its creation, however, the performance began to incorporate more agency: the performers, Koester writes, are in fact 'working on a new act in a dimly-lit theater' (STUK 2017), and do not seem to be in a permanent state of possession, but of fine-tuned perceptiveness and concentration. We are witnessing a rehearsal situation, where the dancers are trying out poses—maybe this one, maybe that—whispering to themselves, 'marking', that is, suggesting gestural movement sequences instead of performing them to completion. Rehearsing and working-towards become the (ethical) act in this video installation. More casual, explorative passages are set off against more frantic ones; routines are occasionally metaphorical—such as a short tap dance section, or a brief gesture of introduction, hands on lapels, mouth whispering 'here we are'—but more often metonymic—in other words, suggesting a contiguity between body and filmic apparatus—shoulders shuddering, fingers flickering, forearms cutting squarely through the air. If Adorno (1996) writes pessimistically in *Minima Moralia* of technology's impact on our 'most secret innervations', that it is making gestures 'precise and brutal', expelling from movements all 'hesitation, deliberation, civility' (40), Koester opens up a counter-vision, 'an alternative space of possibility through technologies, bodies and minds' (STUK 2017), which is a space of gestural room for play.

The movement of the camera is highly perceivable here, sometimes giving the impression of swinging back and forth in a slightly wonky way, as if attached to the pendulum of a huge clock which both keeps time and is dizzied by its change. Koester explains that he and the dancers wanted the camera to be like a 'third performer' so that 'sometimes the cinematographer would move as much as the performers themselves', filming '360 degrees'. 'This eliminated the feeling of a privileged direction and created the impression that the performers were not only "looking for an act", but also "for an audience"' (Koester 2017b). Media competition becomes a form of not-

quite-settled media cooperation, reflecting back on the historical moment at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also pointing up the capacity and élan of screendance in the gallery space. Dance's modification by filmic intervention, that is, should not be considered under the sign of loss (of liveness, presence, and immediacy), but as the beneficial result 'of a particular kind of longing for kinesthetic stimulus that emerges from the space of optical media', as Douglas Rosenberg puts it (2012, 14–15). Optical media allow us, not least, to observe gesture from great proximity, and to do so repeatedly. They enable an enhanced kind of perception and a specific kind of attentiveness, generating an echo in the viewer of the dedicated focus of the performers on the new kinetic world of the apparatus.

In light of the preceding remarks, an ethics of gestural acting—otherwise can be further specified as appearing in a situation that is suspended between the possibility of malfunction and the potential of room for play. We might talk of a gestural ethics where gesturality becomes an object for dedicated analytical exploration and reflection on sites where this gesturality is not taken for granted, but exhibited, on stage or on screen: in its mediality, in the ways it quotes, signifies and departs from signification, but also in the ways in which it follows a forward-looking agenda driven by adaptability and inventiveness. Noland's essay 'Ethics, Staged' (2017) returns to these questions when asking: 'What do dance gestures expose that ordinary gestures do not? Why would such an exposure be "ethical" in Agamben's terms? And why would (his notion of) the ethical rely on a stage?' (67). One answer to these questions is Agamben's emphasis on the value of contemplation, on the above-cited 'joy' of 'human beings' who 'contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting' (2016, 278). This emphasis on self-reflection and potentiality might be challenged, of course. Cavarero—without engaging with Agamben—does so by developing her ethics of the inclined posture from the immediate givenness of a 'sure and practical love, so everyday and spontaneous that it does not express signs of suffering or self-sacrifice, and even less of excessive self-awareness' (2016, 174). Noland's essay, in turn, scrutinises Agamben, bringing to the fore how the 'gesturality' of gesture is exposed, on stage, and in dance; and furthermore, how such exposure, while carrying ethical potential, cannot ever be exclusively 'pure'.¹⁵

This reading is especially provocative as it focuses on the major proponent of twentieth-century 'pure dance', choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, through the 2016 reconstruction of his 1964 choreography, *Winterbranch*. Noland critically engages both with the tenets of Cunningham scholarship and with Agamben's mediality of gesture by writing '[a] means is never pure [...] it can in fact never be exposed as "an end in itself" [...] the means is itself *mediated by what it bears*' (72). Rereading Agamben's analysis of pornography, Noland questions the idea that Agamben 'opens the ethical dimension [...] at the point where communication is lost'. Instead, she argues that he does so

at the point where saying 'something in common' (the clearly legible pornographic gesture) and saying 'nothing' (the gesture interrupted, exposed as a gesture) occur simultaneously. [...] He points us toward that ambiguous point where a narrative unfolds and yet that narrative is suspended, revealing a 'stratum' 'not exhausted' by a narrative [...], a point where the communication is interrupted, yet still 'endured'. (72)

Noland locates the ethics of *Winterbranch* precisely at this point—the choreography ‘practices an ethics of gesture insofar as it suspends movement between an “impure” manifestation (“passion for her”, “anger against him” [Cunningham quoted in Noland 2017, 73]) and raw human kinesis imagined as a “pure” support’.

Noland’s essay also demonstrates that strategies for the exposure of gesturality go beyond Brecht’s and Benjamin’s emphasis on interruption, still very present in Butler’s engagement with a stalling ‘ethos of restraint’ (2015, 41). Noland singles out, for instance, the modifications of one of *Winterbranch*’s partnering movements, where a female performer rolls in a deep arch across the bent back of a male performer, while the front of her body is exposed. Depending on the style and speed of its execution, this movement, which is based on the relation of weight between two people, exposes its gestural potential by creating impressions ranging from protectiveness to possible crash. When executed carefully, however, it draws out nuances of ‘kinaesthetic awareness’ (Brandstetter 2013)—of how it might feel to perform a movement—which might be re-imagined in an equally kinaesthetic sense by an audience who tunes into the dancing on stage (also see Reynolds 2007 and Foster 2010).

Mark Franko’s essay, ‘The Conduct of Contemplation and the Gestural Ethics of Interpretation in Walter Benjamin’s “Epistemo-Critical Prologue”’ (2017), observes an equally kinaesthetic (and ethical) sensibility in Benjamin’s style of thinking and writing. Franko is concerned with the gestural quality of literary and philosophical interpretation, with the ‘rhythm’ and ‘relative velocity’ that structure ‘the operations of critical attention’ (91) which Benjamin describes in his prologue (*Vorrede*) to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels)*. Benjamin is addressing his own method here, and Franko shows how this method is defined by a discontinuous temporality. Meticulous in its detours, it is marked by the intermittency of breathing, and by the stops and starts of turning towards and stepping back from the object of study.¹⁶ Gesturality, in this case, is less a matter of content than of mode, of the temporal and spatial choreography of what Franko calls the conduct of contemplation.¹⁷ Franko argues that the ethics of such conduct lies in the ‘essential rapport’ and ‘performative relation [...] with the interpretive content of the analysis and, hence, to the artwork or works under scrutiny’ (91)—in our example, German baroque drama. The sequentiality of contemplation that ‘always encounters its own death in and as expired breath’ thus adapts to the broken historicity of baroque drama as mourning play, which is fragmented by ‘mortality and decay’ (95, 99). Franko’s ‘essential rapport’ might, in Badiou’s words, be called a gesture of ethical ‘fidelity’ to the *Trauerspiel*, brought about by Benjamin’s radical experience and ‘sustained investigation’ of the genre (Badiou 2001, 67).

Franko’s elaboration of Benjamin’s gestural method, then, also goes beyond Agamben’s pure mediality of gesture. And again, a questioning of violence comes into play. Here, with Franko’s elucidation of Agamben’s use of Benjamin’s idea of ‘violence as pure medium’, which leads Agamben to ‘the idea of gesture in his later essay as itself the communication of communicability, or a means without end’ (93). Arguing for a more complex understanding of gesture and the ethics of gesture in Benjamin, Franko considers gesturality as instrumental to the methodology of philosophical criticism. This is less a matter of a presumed fullness or emptiness of gesture, than

it is of the fact that 'any gestural "manifestation" becomes caught up in reflection', as Franko suggests (102–103). This burden of reflection affects the temporality of processes of reading and understanding. He specifies: 'While the communication of communicability would presumably be instantaneous and swift—as swift as 'the sovereign decision', or a physical act of violence—the ethical gesturality that emerges as method in the *Vorrede* is founded on a rejection of the "purity" of gesture because said purity must by definition remain inaccessible to a hermeneutics' (103).

Benjamin's enhanced gestural awareness links a style of writing and thinking to the bodily performances of gesture which are discussed in the other contributions to this special section. Rather than the differences between writerly, dancerly, and filmic gestures (see Ness 2008 and Noland 2008), our focus on ethics seems to draw out their fault lines. A gestural ethics is also a prime site for the fault lines between theatre, dance (or film) studies, and performance studies. Gestural practice or action is a performance that does not require the proscenium stage (or screen); as Noland (2009) argues: 'the term "gesture" [...] encourages us to view all movements executed by the human body as situated along a continuum—from the ordinary iteration of a habit to the most spectacular and self-conscious performance of a choreography' (6). Schneider's approach exemplifies this sense of the expanded gestural stage. Her contribution, 'In our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Response-ability' (2017), not only revisits her own thinking and writing about gesture across her work to date, but also indicates the directions that it might take in the future, and the kind of ethics this might yield.

As the final piece of this special section, Schneider's essay opens up the field in more than one way. Taking the form of a conversation that was triggered by a number of questions that I posed to begin with, it might be called a 'response', but it also develops an ethics of 'response-ability' that goes beyond the singular writing situation, to reflect on relationality as a fundamental ethical category of calling out, and answering calls. Rethinking her explorations in *The Explicit Body in Performance* and *Performing Remains* of gestural reiteration and citation, and their potential to at once reinstate the same and bring about the different, Schneider engages with the gesture of the hail. Both predicated upon a fundamentally ethical relationality (see Benjamin 2015, Levinas 1969) and susceptible to ideological investment, the hail epitomises the operations of the 'both/and', a logic of conjunction that structures and punctuates Schneider's thoughts on gesture: from the classic Brechtian tactic in which performance both replays and counters conditions of subjugation to Alexander Weheliye's reclamation of this tactic for black and critical ethnic studies. The gesture of the hail leads us, then, to the gesture of protest of the Black Lives Matter movement. The hands that are held up in the air both replay (and respond to) the standard pose of surrender in the face of police authority and call for a future that might be different. By doing so, this gesture of protest literally stages what has been called, at the beginning of this introduction, a Levinasian 'opening to the Other', albeit in a situation of threat and resistance to threat: a gesture of disarmament which also disarms the onlooker.

Without going back to Agamben, Schneider's response also radically questions the viability of a pure mediality of gesture, as such a proposition would need to be predicated upon the assumption that everyone has equal opportunity to blend in with the unmarked agent of this mediality, the

ahistorical 'liberal humanist figure' (Weheliye 2014, 8) of white Man. What her response-ability thus equally effectuates, is a shift away from potentiality as unmarked space. Following Schneider's argument, gesture's acting-otherwise can only ever be accomplished by the ways in which gestures act on their own implication in the signifying structures of gender, sexuality, race, and class, on how these structures play out relationally across time and space, and between historically and locally situated human beings.

To conclude: A note of thanks. A series of serendipitous moments made this project possible. It began in summer 2015, when I was encouraged to apply for conference support by a newly-established network—an application that was, in the end, unsuccessful. But instead, the Schröder Fund and the German Endowment Fund of the Department of German and Dutch at the University of Cambridge stepped in, and my thanks goes to the boards of these two funds, especially to Sarah Colvin. In his editorial note to that summer's issue of *Dance Research Journal*, Mark Franko (2015) suggested that the assembled contributions, which included an article of mine, together worked 'toward an ethics of gesture' (1)—a formulation which I found so pertinent that it stuck in my mind, so much so that I turned it into the title of the symposium that I organised at Emmanuel College, Cambridge in April 2016. Thanks are due to Alyce Mahon and Andrew Webber, who chaired sessions during the day and enriched the discussion with their interventions. I also thank Emmanuel College for the provision of conference facilities and for a memorable dinner. All but one of the contributions to the symposium are documented in this special section. Jonas Tinius, for whose input I remain grateful, decided to publish his contribution elsewhere; Rebecca Schneider agreed to embark on a question-based revisiting of her work on gesture instead of contributing her conference paper, leading to a shared intellectual journey that proved as exciting as it was enlightening—my heartfelt thanks are due to her. A brilliant gesture workshop at the Warburg Institute London, which took place in December 2016, confirmed my sense that a renewed engagement with gesture in and beyond Agamben was warranted, and I thank Andrew Benjamin and Christopher Johnson for their hospitality and for facilitating such stimulating discussions during that event. I had the good fortune of being able to attend a seminar by Mark Franko at Gabriele Brandstetter's series of research colloquia at Free University Berlin in January 2017, where he developed the elegant gestural reading of Benjamin's epistemo-critical prologue which is testified to in his present contribution to this special section. I would also like to extend my thanks to Joachim Koester, whose art instigated much of the thinking in this introduction, and who so generously shared his works and insights.

I am thrilled that *Performance Philosophy* agreed to publish the following array of articles, and my thanks goes to the editors, especially to Theron Schmidt, for their support throughout the publication process; to the anonymous reviewers, for their careful reading and expert advice; to Rosa van Hensbergen, for her brilliant editorial and administrative assistance and wonderful dance conversation; and, last but not least, to all of the contributors, for their stellar work, and for the enthusiasm with which they entered into this collaborative exploration of how gesture acts otherwise.

Notes

¹ Giorgio Agamben first published this text in 1991 under the title 'Notes sur le geste' in the cinema journal *Revue Traffic*, founded in the same year by French film critic Serge Daney.

² Note here the topic of this year's *Performance Philosophy* conference (Prague 2017), 'How does Performance Philosophy Act? Ethos, Ethics, Ethnography'.

³ For current research in the anthropology of theatre and performance that engages with the ethics of theatre and rehearsal practice as a form of Foucauldian self-cultivation, see, for example, Tinius (2015).

⁴ Flusser's theory was published in German in 1991, the same year as 'Notes sur le geste'. In 2014, an English translation appeared under the title *Gestures*.

⁵ The gesture of photographing is a philosophical gesture, or to put it differently: since photography was invented, it is possible to philosophize not only in the medium of words, but also in that of photographs. The reason is that the gesture of photographing is a gesture of seeing, and so engages in what the antique thinkers called "theoria," producing a picture that these thinkers called "idea" (Flusser 2011, 286).

⁶ Even though Carrie Noland's seminal *Agency and Embodiment* (2009) does not explicitly focus on the ethics of gesture, its engagement with the agency of kinaesthetic experience, and with the subtleties and varieties of gestural deviations as well as norms, provides cornerstones for the present enquiry.

⁷ See also André Lepecki's notes on Gilles Deleuze and an ethics of dance, as 'a project of affirming life as a desire to activate powers (*pouissance*) and affects that are not bound to organizational tyrannies or majoritarian imperatives on how to live one's life' (2007, 119).

⁸ For a discussion of this passage, see also Minden and Schwan in this special section.

⁹ *Aufhebung* is used here in the Hegelian sense of both 'abolishment' and 'preservation'.

¹⁰ For Agamben's use of 'form-of-life', see the following: 'By the term *form-of-life*, [...] I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life. [...] It defines a life—human life—in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power (Agamben 2000b, 3–4).

¹¹ In contrast to Agamben's 'action of a destituent potential', my use of 'acting-otherwise' shifts the emphasis from philosophical reflection to corporeal practice, while retaining Agamben's differentiation between action that constitutes something and action that is potential and destituent. I suggest 'acting-otherwise' as a general formula that needs to be fleshed out and made specific by addressing the particularities of singular gestural practice, which take precedence over and might challenge philosophical consistency. It would be fruitful, but goes beyond the scope of this introduction, to include a third term here, Deleuze and Guattari's '*agencement*', as used recently by Erin Manning (2016). As opposed to agency's focus on an individual or a group's volition, *agencement* values 'modes of experience backgrounded in the account of agency', especially those that deviate from neurotypicality; *agencement* also 'carries within itself a sense of movement and connectivity' (123), questioning any clear-cut dialectic of willed/unwilled action.

¹² Agamben's use of '*gag*' in *Notes on Gesture* as 'something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech', but also 'in the sense 'of the actor's improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak' (2000a, 59) is another way of naming that which he, in *The Use of Bodies*, calls the 'constitutively destituent' (2016, 277).

¹³ It should be noted here that the dancers who perform in *The Place of Dead Roads* are all linked to the Flemish dance scene which Laermans addresses.

¹⁴ Andrew Webber writes: 'The balls are, suitably enough, made of celluloid: fabricated, that is, as objects of projections for a theatrical home-movie' (Webber 1996, 327).

¹⁵ For a helpful philosophical discussion of 'purity', see Cull (2012, 229–234).

¹⁶ Compare Koester's amplification of the sounds of breath-taking in *The Place of Dead Roads*, and Minden's remarks on gestures of breath in his contribution to the special section.

¹⁷ Franko's gestural ethics of interpretation should therefore not be confused with Agamben's 'gestic criticism', which is concerned with the 'intention' of the work or works that are being studied (1999, 77).

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Biography

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