

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

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“with a gesture which none that saw it ever forgot” (Woolf 93)

This, the first of two volumes featuring the topic of gestures, presents a selection of essays published in the wake of the *Interfaces* conference that was held at Université de Bourgogne (Dijon, France) in June 2017 (“Gestures in Texts and the Visual Arts”). Volumes 39 and 40 inaugurate a new phase in the publishing history of the journal as we are moving from print to digital publication. The theme of gestures was therefore well suited to accompany this transitional phase, at a moment when the editorial team is reflecting on past achievement with pride in a rich archive – due to be digitized – and looking forward to future developments. For gestures have a relational nature, relating intention to inscription, project to action, self to other, and can be deployed in a variety of ways.

More generally, and moving away from the context of publication, gestures are characterized by their immediacy and in-betweenness (Citton 21, 3). As Michel Guérin notes, they build a bridge between animality and humanity, body and soul, nature and culture, zoology and socio-technology, instrumental as they are to the dialectic relationship between matter and thought, between our tools and the world (Guérin 22-24). To use Giorgio Agamben’s notion of a third way beyond *poiesis* and *praxis*, gesture is no mere means to an end, nor an end in itself, but the “exhibition of a mediality” (58). Volume 39 explores this mediating function and gathers essays that are all concerned to some extent with the paradoxical nature of the traces left by gestures, indexical records of fleeting bodily actions and embodied intention, as well as signs of absence and loss pointing at an irretrievable archive. Placed under the aegis of Virginia Woolf’s (mock)biographical quest, they follow critical, philosophical and experimental paths to reconstruction. When, in the absence of any “trustworthy record” (Woolf 84), the narrator of *Orlando* seeks to reconstruct the transitional scene preceding Orlando’s sex change, the text dwells on the ceremony during which he receives his dukedom and crowns himself with the ducal coronet, “with a gesture which none that saw it ever forgot” (93). Built around a central absence (“none”), this short excerpt encapsulates the dialectical interplay of memory and oblivion, suggesting

that recording is a precarious balancing act whilst affirming at the same time the performative and self-effacing nature of identity.

The present collection brings together contributions that encompass philosophical analysis, media archaeology and artistic experimentation with a bent for anthropology, art history and intermediality. They emphasize the reconstructive nature of critical and artistic enquiry when dealing with the traces of gestures. They examine how the efficacy and enduring effects of gestures can be construed by taking into account the traces that they have left. Those traces may be inscriptions onto a variety of mediums – such as engraving plates or the palm of the hand itself – or they may also be primary, analytical sources describing certain gestural techniques – as in musical practice or sculpture. The detection of the modalities of the human touch and of haptic inscription, as well as the embodied nature of practice-led research are exemplified by many of the essays in this volume which all present singular paths of enquiry. This way of apprehending gestures may be contrasted with the approach of critics who tackle their ephemeral and inchoative nature. Barbara Formis, for instance, stresses that the analysis of gesture must not be overwritten by the scrutiny of its products and traces (9), which echoes Agamben's observation that works of art are but "fragments of a gesture" and that images are in part "the reification and obliteration of a gesture" (55). Indeed, gestures are events characterized by self-effacement (Derrida 10; Formis 9), which seems to dismiss attention to traces as irrelevant. Talking about the draughtsman's gesture as "the essence and excellence" of gestures, Jean-Luc Nancy dwells on their inchoative nature:

this gesture is above all what is most proper to a *gesture*: an immanent *signifiante*, in other words, without the sign taking off toward the signified, but a sense that is offered right at the body [*à même le corps*], right at a body that becomes less active, efficient, or operative than the body that gives itself over to a motion – to an emotion – that received it, coming from beyond its functional corporeality. (Nancy 39)

Whilst this collection displays an awareness of the elusiveness of gestures, it also offers a genetic perspective that shifts the focus to the viewpoint of the observer/researcher. Like Formis, Vilém Flusser has pointed out that the end product of a gesture is not the gesture itself, as in his chapter on "The Gesture of Painting": "the painting to be painted is assumed in the gesture, the painted painting is the stiffened, frozen gesture" (Flusser 70). He also stresses that its intersubjective nature allows us to embrace it: "the gesture shows the one who is analyzing it that he must enter into the gesture if he wants to resolve the *enigma*. [...] To analyze the gesture of painting with the intention of understanding it, one must engage with it oneself" (65-66; italics in the text).

The essays in this volume offer a variety of ways of engaging with gestures. Whilst the authors are aware of their elusive nature, they seek to retrieve foundational gestures in a historicist, technical and ontological perspective, thus raising issues of retrieval, investigation and transmission and implicitly providing a comment on critical enquiry as the obverse of its pursued object, in the sense that the analytical retrieval of gestures mirrors gestures in the making. They demonstrate the empathetic nature of the artist's and researcher's response to their objects of enquiry, which mirrors and is underscored by the empathy prevalent in the apprehension of gestures (Angelino 26-28). This ties in with Alessandro Pignocchi's intentional model whereby our perception of traces, artefacts and works of art is based on our cognitive understanding of those objects as resulting from motor intention (159-162; see also Hauer). As Nancy has underlined, aesthetic experience involves *methexis* – audience participation: “I embrace the line that I am gazing at or the musical movement that I hear” (93).

The first four articles explore the materiality of traces that share a common origin as carved traces – i.e. as instances of *graphie* (Flusser 19). Michel Guérin's opening essay on the gesture of writing provides a follow-up to his analysis of the four elementary types of anthropological gesture that he defines in *Philosophie du geste*: making, giving, writing and dancing form a “quartet of gestures” (12) that foreground technological developments, social and economic exchanges, recording and historicity, aesthetics and figurability, and that are related to four aspects of the relation to time: “progress, remanence/return, duration, instant” (81). In “Le Geste risque-tout: écrire”, Guérin first examines how the materiality of writing is defined by the carving/tracing gesture which consists of a form of percussion (according to Leroi-Gourhan's typology) inscribing onto a surface traces that are to be transmuted into mental shapes. Writing provides the means of “laying down thought” (“déposer la pensée” 59) and make it possible to “raise signs” through reading – leaving graphic signs to their archival function. “[W]riting burns its bridges”, writes Guérin since imprinting mental shapes involves sacrificing the sensible world.

Whilst the gesture of writing is “introverted” – insofar as it is a mental gesture, as Guérin argues here – the next paper focuses on traces of “extroverted gestures”, those left by prehistoric man. Linking contemporary art and ancient times, Chloé Morille looks at the endeavours of French writer Jean-Loup Trassard and Spanish artist Miquel Barcelò to retrieve the sensory experience of our ancestors in her essay “‘Geste dans geste, comme un gant’: Mains tendues à la préhistoire”. Significantly Morille does not seek to restore a lost origin but to examine a critical and historicising gesture, “putting one's finger [...] on the very traces of these men's thoughts”, to use one of her quotes from Trassard's novel *Dormance* (119). However, such experience of regained gestures through ancestral bodily memory proves ambivalent as it creates a sense of continuity and of loss. Holding an axe made of polished stone, for instance, allows for a “metonymic transport” of an imaginary and emotional nature, underlying

the role of the hand and of touch.¹ But it also induces a feeling of melancholy with the realization that the haptic search for renewed contact and ancestral gesture is bound to fail. What Morille emphasizes in a striking manner is how the haptic attempt to grasp the past – encapsulated in Barcelò’s sensual contact with a surface as sensitive as the skin – also implies the awareness of absence, a paradox that underscores the dialectic image of the print signifying both contact and loss (Didi-Huberman 18, 309).

The next two essays are concerned with the particular form of imprint that is engraving. As Laurence Tuot and Anne Bécharde-Léauté observe in this volume, prints seem to “call for genetic investigation” and the connoisseur who tries “to retrace the gestures that revealed them” can be compared to “a hunter tracking a prey from the slightest prints left in the mud”, a quest that is similar to Trassard’s.² So here again, what is advocated is “a gestural and dynamic mode” of research which is also exemplified by Michael Phillips’s approach in his essay “Printing in the infernal method”. Phillips’s name has long been associated with that of William Blake. Since 2000 at least, when he contributed to the Blake exhibition and catalogue at Tate Britain, Phillips has described with accuracy and even reproduced Blake’s innovative technique of “Illuminating Printing”, which involved the use of relief-etched copper plates, as he explains at <http://www.williamblakeprints.co.uk>. He was able to reproduce some facsimile plates in the manner of Blake, using as a clue a fragment from one of the artist’s cancelled plates. This technical practice is grounded in a wider epistemological perspective since, as Phillips explains, Blake’s belief in innate ideas finds its material corollary in his engraving and printing method.

Blake’s creative experimentation finds a counterpart in the work of British painter and engraver Stanley William Hayter whose handbook *New Ways of gravure* (1949) is currently being translated by Anne Bécharde-Léauté and Laurence Tuot, who contribute the essay “Stanley William Hayter: Les nouveaux gestes de la gravure”. Like Phillips, Hayter stressed the “intimate connection between the functioning of the plastic imagination and the manipulation of the plastic means” (Hayter quoted by Bécharde-Léauté and Tuot). His new method of colour printing was inspired by Blake’s technique of relief printing, as shown by the handbook that provides a self-reflexive insight into his genetic processes and his enquiry into the fundamental gesture of line drawing as embodied temporality. His originality lies in new modes of gestural engagement described as letting-go and as wayfaring. His technique relies on improvisation and randomness, which Bécharde-Léauté and Tuot relate to Surrealist

¹ About the inaugural gesture of prehistoric man whose first cave paintings meant both separation and contact, see Marie-José Mondzain (52-55).

² About the venatic model of deduction (i.e. pertaining to hunting), see Carlo Ginzburg’s chapter “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm” (especially 103-105).

spontaneity, and it provides a striking instance of the balance between mastery and alienation which characterizes gesture according to Citton (46).

The body's engagement with a medium serves as a transition towards the second half of this collection which focuses on musical practice, sculpture and uses of the hand. The first of the last four essays, "Les gestes de la musique ancienne dans les textes et l'iconographie", deals with musical instruments.³ Like the authors of the two previous essays, Cyril Lacheze and Marion Weckerle are involved in a process of reconstruction based on scholarly research and technical experiments. Their study of musical gestures is grounded in historical research – involving textual and iconographic resources as well as performance on ancient instruments. The present essay shows how techniques for playing the violin and the clarinet have evolved in Europe and it seeks to determine whether the historical reconstruction of ancient gestures is feasible. It emphasizes the limits of textual-based research in a field where oral transmission has always played a crucial role, raising once more the issue of implicit knowledge in the transmission and/or loss of gestural experience and stressing the importance of intuitive embodied knowledge in a scientific quest for a history of musical gestures.

The next two papers focus more specifically on the hand, discussing its agency in complementary ways. Working within the field of media archaeology, Barbara Grespi addresses the medial function of the hand as metonymy for the body, pre-technical apparatus and prosthetic tool in "Dans la paume de la main: L'archéologie du cinéma en un geste". Shifting the focus from visuality to the haptic, she traces the contours of the imaginary potency of cinema in relation to chiromancy and to such apparatus as Freud's Wunderblock. The lines of the hand are like hieroglyphic traces that also invite an analogy with the face and with landscape. The palm of the hand is construed as a screen allowing for visualization and figurability, as well as an inscribed surface and memory storage device to be deciphered and used for a variety of ends – divination and musical notation, for instance.

The overdetermined efficacy of the hand described by Grespi is to be contrasted with artistic projects of unmediated presentation such as Arman's *Allures d'objet*, which Jennifer Watson Wester examines in her discussion of Nouveau Réalisme in France in the context of the post-war European and American art scenes, "Objectified Gestures? Index and Agency in Arman's *Allures d'objet*". In Arman's works, traces are construed as indexes of the object's presence and of its movement in space, thus negating or rather underdetermining the autographic nature of artistic gesture. Wester stresses the inherent contradictions in the effort of objectifying gestural practice and her essay explores a form of

³ For a recent analysis of the instrument as medium and extension of the human body, see Sophie Angot ("L'instrument de musique dans l'œuvre de Pascal Quignard : un substitut du corps, intermédiaire entre la vie et la mort").

experimentation that provides a negative – in the sense of reversed – outline of gesture as authoring production of traces.

The analogy between “Arman’s practice and natural or found phenomena” underlined by Wester leads us to the final essay in this collection, “Translating gesture from sculpture to text”, in which Andrew Devanny and David Fentham present their collaborative project involving practice-based research and digital poetry as a response to Barbara Hepworth’s sculpture. Yet, in contrast with Arman’s distancing himself from the autographic, their work looks at how human gesture can embrace natural (in the sense of physical and elemental) agency. They outline a broad definition of gesture as a form of energetic shaping that extends beyond the limits of the human body, insofar as some of Hepworth’s work evoke natural agency and because their intermedial project involves transferring the sculptor’s gestures into a digital medium. The resulting digital poems are accessible online. The three types of gestures that they have identified, tension (extending into the future), formation (turning to the genesis of natural forms) and invitation (drawing in the viewer) form a triad that sums up some of the main aspects of this collection which they bring to a close.

As Yves Citton argues, the reproduction and circulation of images and narratives make it possible for us to be moved by gestures that “generate within us affective echoes” (40; our translation), which does not preclude critical distance. The notion of “echo chamber” gathering past, present and future may be reformulated thanks to the input of archaeology and material culture studies. Artefacts, as Andrew Jones proposes, are not mute. Rather than signs to be read, they are events “that occurred in the past but that survive in the present” (3) within indexical and citational fields allowing for a dialogical reexperiencing (81, 25). So gestures do not simply leave traces. Reflecting on prehistoric mark making, Lambros Malafouris writes that those early marks are “not so much the trace (and thus the end mark) of a human gesture as they are an actual part and thus a continuation of such a gesture in time and space” (191). Research and criticism play an invaluable role in the interaction with gestures as forms of prolonged agency, letting them affect us as we engage with them.

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