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Gesture

Sometimes used metaphorically to designate the imprecise, allusive, or general referencing in statements that can be compared to the sweeping motions of limbs, and sometimes to hint at the humble subtleties of unfinished thought, the conceptual core of the gesture, or gestural, is located in the body, while its conceptual reach is beyond its actions. As expressive movements of bodies, gestures remain unfinished. Gestures may have beginnings, give direction, and leave **traces**; in a gestural state, endpoints are never, or rather, are always not yet reached (see also **navigation**). As such, there is a double side and ambivalence to gestures when taken as *expressive* of thought, **affect**, identity, or other subjective qualities and activities. Such a communicative perspective assumes there is a **deictic** center—the point of origin where the gesture begins—and an observer or spectating subject who interprets the gesture as expressive. The gesture is, as such, not only (and not yet) expressive, as it is also *productive* of thought, affect, or identity. Or, as we could say, gestures gesture toward such production, as unfinished, **open**-ended, and in the midst of becoming known.

When understood as embodied knowledge caught in the middle of a **generative** transfer, we can discern different questions about or readings of gestures touching as well as diverging. A critical perspective on gestures can zoom in on how the direction of the gesture, even if unfinished, does already entail a complex politics of positionality already embedded in the gesture. For example, for his critical reading of the staging of colonialism in the Africa Museum Tervuren in Belgium, cultural analyst Murat Aydemir (2008) invokes Mieke Bal's (1996) writing about **curatorial** gesture of *exposing* in museum exhibitions to discern how such gestures can come with a first-person authority as well as with an objectification of that which is brought to the attention of the second-person addressee. This construction of authority, and in this case also positions of in- and exclusion (the object as "they" who are looked at by the "we" as **assembled** by the exposing gesture), corresponds with the diagrammatic relation of the exhibition's **dispositif** . The exhibition analyzed by Aydemir demonstrates a double gesture that nostalgically repeats and with retrospective self-reflexively also points out its archaic colonial gesture:

> Hence, visiting the museum now offers the choice opportunity to experience both the full effect of the main exhibition and to reflect critically on its message. In Bal's terms, the main expository agent tells the viewer: "Look! That's how the primitives are." The second, supplementary agent adds: "Look! That's how we used to display the 'primitives.'" (2008, 82)

The one, however, does not disarm the other, as he concludes:

> In its current incarnation, perched between outdatedness and anticipation, Tervuren's mise-en-scène combines a distanced perspective on the colonial past that vacillates between critique and nostalgia, while it simultaneously situates its visitors intimately in the colonial present. At each turn of the walking tour, those visitors fail to meet the people who are the museum's scientific objects: imprisoned in displays that deny them temporality and, hence, life, they simultaneously haunt the building as ephemerally as they do insistently. (95)

The two gestures here remain parallel and as such reinscribe rather than intervene in relations already set by institutional, ideological, and political frameworks.

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Such a **dramaturgical** and semiotic understanding of gesture opens up to an analytical perspective on the meanings that gestures perform in and through their directionality. Moreover, such gestures are firmly embedded in cultural, discursive frameworks and are in that sense ready-made. A creative perspective on gestures can investigate the emergent quality and layered temporality that their performativity entails. Inspired by painter Paul Klee's observations about sketches being the material residue of gestural movements, theorist and historian of urban design Wim Nijenhuis (2019) calls this the gestural expressivity of lines in **architectural** sketches, which represent their own indexicality—an expressivity that requires a specific attention on part of the interpreter, as

> their state of "being made" is more significant than their capacity for representation. What [gestural] lines share with the material of making is their ambiguity and ability to indicate paths that the maker can follow. That is why sketches require careful observation, one tailored to their specific appearance. (135)

Artist William Kentridge works with this principle in his stop-motion animations of palimpsestic charcoal drawings, erasures, and redrawings. This reminds us that, like most creative acts, we see, find, and recognize gestures via the material traces of their mediation, shaped by material **conditions** and **dispositifs** of apparatuses and **interfaces**. Such mediation is technologically as well as culturally bound.

In a **multimodal** text that uses words, stills, and moving images, theorist Janneke Adema and artist Kamila Kuc bring together a critical and creative perspective on reading and writing gestures in an experimental investigation of the conditions for the performativity and the possibility for what they call the unruliness of gestures or "gestures that try to visualize, expose and disturb these controlling mechanisms" (2019, 194). They ask:

> How are our reading/writing gestures **implicated** in meaning-making and knowledge production? What role do gestures play in intra-action with interfaces, media and human intentionality? How are gestures structured and what are their potentialities? Where does gestural agency lie within apparatuses of control (be they cultural, technological or discursive)? (194; cross-reference added)

Their experimentation with reading and writing gestures both examines and demonstrates that these gestures are part of an agential entanglement of bodies and technologies, and of positionalities of readers and writers, or observers and performers, that dynamically and iteratively constitute and reconfigure each other.

READING

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