

DOUBTFUL MOTION: *Gesture as Performance*

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A few years back, I heard a rumor: Steve Kado, a Canadian performance artist, had walked north from his home in Koreatown to the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia—a distance of 30 miles. In a city built for cars, walking such a distance is obviously an act of pure will. If his car was at the mechanic, surely he could have found a ride with a friend; if trying to escape the city’s essential cliché, LA Metro public transportation is actually fairly functional. Several months later I heard another rumor: Kado also walked from Koreatown to the port of Long Beach, 30 miles to the south. Between these two performances, Kado somewhat astoundingly bisected the city along its longitudinal axis. This artwork no doubt recalls Bas Jan Ader’s 1973 *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in Los Angeles)*. Yet unlike Ader’s thoroughly documented journey, the only trace of Kado’s performance is hearsay. While the former leaves us with poetry—snippets of song lyrics delicately written onto each photograph, an oh-so-solitary figure wandering through the night—the latter’s journey dries the mouth and brain with the thought of spending so much time on the dusty shoulder of San Fernando Road. Kado’s walk seems inanely paced in comparison to constant iPhone-ing and much hyper-snappy contemporary video art, its willful slowness highlighting our daily high-speed jitter.

But upon further consideration, did his walks actually take place? A search for answers reveals only the difficulty of discussing Kado’s project—not only because

of its inherently slippery epistemology, but also because such a performance doesn’t seem to fit into any established discourse. The truth of the rumor can never be pinned down. Then how to proceed when so thoroughly denied any agency as viewers? In this complete rejection of the experiential, the project’s art-value must be understood semiotically within cultural and environmental context. Yet this is different from what might be described as “action” or “interventionist” performance—the former (most simply) seemingly reliant on process, and the latter leaving an evident physical or cultural disruption.

The answer can be found in gesture—a term used too loosely in art discourse. Painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, is most frequently described as “gestural”—but what does that mean? That the flick of a brush somehow corresponds to an inner emotional and psychological being? A painting is often constructed with hundreds or thousands of paint-movements; presumably not every mark can carry equal emotive urgency. Gesture, the symbolic movement that supposedly conveys interiority, instead borders on the mechanic, or worse yet, dead-ends in discussion of the non-representational. Through a closer examination of several classic performance works, I hope to reevaluate this term apart from the grandiose Modernist cliché.



Outside of art discourse, gesture is a symbolic or token motion intended to emphasize or affect: movement as metaphor. One accepts a bow to suggest honor, respect, humility, yet it is really through shared cultural context that leaning forward in the company of others means, “You are of greater power and esteem than I.” Gesture must be corporeal: it is either carried out through physical movement, or is an intentional motion with an implied enactor. These movements always return to an original context and a performing body. Giorgio Agamben, in his short essay “Notes On Gesture,”

expands:

What characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting,” returning to context as it “opens the sphere of ethos as the most fitting sphere of the human.¹

Gesture pokes at the codes of its surrounding environment, sourcing and grounding the enactor; the subsequent interpretation may call these very values into question.

Within art, we can relocate the meaning of this term in performance work. It seems necessary to describe certain performative projects not as actions or interventions but as gestures. Born of the early demonstrations of Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, gesture is an embodied performance. It is vulnerable to and through interpretation, due to a diffused (and often removed) audience/performer relationship. Gesture-as-performance occurs outside of the traditional dialectic created by recital-style work. In his *Living Sculptures* (c. 1961), for example, Manzoni designated “audience” members as artwork by “performing” a signature on their body in a

social setting. This can be positioned in contrast to early Fluxus and Situationist happenings, which emphasize the physical experience of a viewer vis-à-vis the actions of a performance. Gesture exists in spectrum with action, sliding between the interpretive and the experiential. Semiotically, this continuum may be mapped onto the axis between metaphor and metonym. As with these two linguistic terms, whether the author intends a didactic message or affective meaning determines the degree to which they relinquish interpretive control, and drives the method by which they deliver content.

Gesture performance can exist completely within documentation. Indeed, because it relies heavily on author-in-context for meaning, it is not easily recreated. Unlike that of action, the power of the gesture lives recursively—perhaps only so—through text, image, or word of mouth. This stands apart from an artwork which requires a viewer to traverse and interact with an environment, or in which movement depends on the subjective, in-the-moment choices of a performer. Agamben quite eloquently elaborates on the two-fold relation of gesture to the photograph, which underscores why gesture-as-performance-art can exist so fully in documentation:

In fact, every image is animated by an antinomial polarity: on the one hand this is the reification and effacement of a gesture (the *imago* either as symbol or as the wax mask of the corpse); on the other it maintains the *dynamis* (as in Muybridge’s split-second photographs, or in any photograph of a sporting event). The former corresponds to the memory of whose voluntary recall it takes possession; the latter to the image flashed in the epiphany of involuntary

memory. And while the former dwells in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself, towards a whole of which it is a part.²

Though Agamben later asserts this as a problem to be solved by film, this dialectic enriches our understanding of gesture-as-performance. Documentation immediately crystallizes the movement and environment in some manner of public-sphere museological display. A viewer's memories are actively concentrated toward the being of that gesture (and its context)—but as an ideal (*imago*), and not necessarily as the movement presented as such. We are given the incomplete narrative and its limits. At the same time, Agamben's *dynamis* allows an opening of meaning through extrapolation. Understanding thickens based on our own biases, opinions, and emotional makeup, but only as associated with the potential of what we have witnessed. It is this fuzziness of subjective interpretation that sets gesture apart from action. Gesture strives to provoke an indefinite viewer understanding. This could be considered a shortcoming; but the performance regains power as meaning builds in relationship to known, personal experience. Because documentation affords gesture this isolation, its affect has the potential to surpass the demonstrative. Gesture may be more potent captured than experienced live.

Historically, action starts empty. Alan Kaprow specified that, within his *18 Happenings* (1959), “actions will mean nothing clearly formulable so far as the artist is concerned.” The staged activity of the performer, through which “the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible,” becomes merely formal.³ Happenings attempted to

coerce the audience into losing their sense of viewership; to this purpose, the actions of the artwork were emptied of symbolic value.

Around the same time, the Viennese Actionists embraced ritual and violence as means of emotional extortion, but still eschewed symbolic value. In 1960s performances of *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, Hermann Nitsch shredded a lamb carcass on stage as a “manifest action (an ‘aesthetic’ substitute for a sacrificial act).” He aimed for audience catharsis:

Through my artistic production . . . I take upon myself the apparently negative, unsavoury, perverse, obscene, the passion and the hysteria of the act of sacrifice so that YOU ARE spared the sullyng, shaming descent into the extreme.⁴

In Nitsch's words, these staged actions were intended to be so full of primal (and ultimately accessible) passions that a viewer could be freed from the emotional hardships inflicted by the extreme violence of mid-century Europe.

It is tempting to think of Nitsch's sanguinary performances as gesture, but this overlooks his insistence on viewer involvement. Though the first few *aktionen* had a passive audience, his performances grew larger and eventually included active participation, ultimately becoming an orchestrated action theatre. The artwork was conducted through a group of other actor-participants in symphonies of ceremonial activity—a Dionysian *gesamtkunstwerk* including music, dancing, fruits, and the smearing of blood. What differentiates this art-action from art-gesture is the emphasis on experience over interpretation. When a performer undertakes such

gruesome tasks as an individual gesture, they strive for the symbolic translation concomitant with environmental context and, more loosely, viewership. Instead, Nitsch stated,

The negative image of Dionysian debauchery, passion, ends in the masochistic excess of sacrifice. . . . The O.M. Theatre utilizes this phenomenon, and in this way achieves a regression within art, a break-through of the Dionysian. . . . The sensually real, sadomasochistic situation of tearing-up is identical with an extreme break-through of instincts.⁵

Orgien Mysterien Theatre was a Brechtian experience of theatre acts, a ritualistic catharsis for the viewer. In a sense, Nitsch's *gesamtkunstwerk* was not so far from Kaprow's professed fluidity between life and art, though in this case on an emotional level.

Undertaken a decade later, Czech "actionist" Jirí Kovanda's early works exemplify the gesture-as-performance. Merged into the public sphere, the art-value is only found within recording. These meditations on contact took place within the streets of late '70s Prague, and became so slight as to be completely unobservable except through text and photo documentation prepared by the artist. Most works are tautologically titled: *Untitled (On an escalator...turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing beside me...)*, 3 September 1977. An earlier performance, *Untitled (19 November 1976)*, locates Kovanda in Prague's Wenceslas Square, arms spread full eagle, trying to block or simply touch passersby. In an interview with Slovak artist Július Koller, Kovanda described the goal of these works as:

to examine and to experience relations and borders between people in public

spaces, for example. Or my own position there in everyday situations. Or a position of an individual in a crowd. Among others.⁶

The muscle of this work lies in its double interpretation as both an immediate attempt for intimate contact with strangers and as an embodied gesture towards free will and movement. Kovanda has stated,

The question is when communication takes place. I think it's at the moment when the thing is referred to as art.

That means that if an action has an audience, it happens straight away. If no spectators have been invited, however, I think it doesn't take place until afterwards . . . when it's presented as art.⁷

The work *Untitled (Waiting for someone to call me ...)*, 18 November 1976 demonstrates that Kovanda's performances hinge on this crux—that is, on the gesture. In private, Kovanda sat beside a telephone and waited for someone to call. It is unclear if anyone was present for this performance (nor does it matter); likewise, it is uncertain if anyone knew to contact Kovanda at this given point in time. What now exists for the viewer is a photograph of the artist sitting solemnly beside the telephone, with text above reading "x x x/18. Listopadu 1976/Praha/Cekám, až mi nekdo zavolá..." Whether someone did call remains inescapably ambiguous; accordingly, it follows to think of his behavior symbolically, as gesture.⁸

Presentation context is another distinguishing feature along the gesture/action spectrum. Returning to Nitsch, his actions were clearly bracketed in mediated performativity even though they may have been loosely scripted and invited participation. Broadening the definition of gesture, we

are looking for movements that express an idea, sentiment, or attitude. It seems that in order to find meaning in a gesture-movement, there must be some relationship to the earnest or sincere—some immediate proximity to the performer—even though it may be untrustworthy. So what then of gestures in a traditional performer/audience dialectic, where a viewer's attendance presupposes a blanket acceptance of staging?

Robert Ashley, seminal experimental composer and pioneer of opera-for-television (precursor to music television), accuses live staging of coddling spectators. A viewer comes to witness an artwork divorced from the genuine being of themselves or the performer, and as such their experience becomes *mise-en-scène*. Referring to the trend toward music recitals in the 1970s, he writes:

That palpable but invisible wall between the entertainer and the audience is a fact of the recital. As a member of the audience you are a consumer and a consumer only. Take your seat. The musicians come on stage. Two or three pieces. Intermission. Two or three pieces. End. You are back out on the street having had an experience, which in most cases lasts only as long as the experience itself. This is a recital. It could have been juggling or a live porno act. Whatever it is, you are not a part of it. You have been a watcher. The recitalist hopes that you have been entertained. But you have not been included. You have simply been distracted from what is outside. . . . Because the composer does not have the idea of including the people who come while the music is being enacted. We have lost the idea of the rituals that remind the people who come that what is happening is only a

small part, a “surfacing” of the continuing musicality of everyday life.⁹

Staging immediately nudges a performance toward a predetermined outcome, foreclosing a broader comprehension available through context, convenience, and similitude. A sign made by an actor may be interpreted as a gesture, but only in relationship to the fixed phrasing given within the experience. This forces a canned interpretation: viewers “learn” through mediated actions in an artificially contained environment. This does not carry meaning beyond the stage. True gesture relies on proximity within a (shared) public context, and a vulnerable interpretation based on metaphoric shiftiness. Such a position is weak—but this weakness gives gesture its power. It is exactly what defines gesture, a fleece for something too hard or soft to be spoken, executed in the same everyday reality that both the performer and witness share. Gesture can become a bridge to the truly unspeakable.

David Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* occupies precisely this position. During a blizzard in 1983, Hammons sold snowballs of varying sizes, priced accordingly, alongside other vendors in New York City's Cooper Square. This performance seems like a comment on the position of the artist himself within relations of class and race: an African-American man associating with low-brow street vendors rather than the luxury of the white-box gallery, while perhaps also positioning art as a scam. Within the artwork, Hammons provided no clues as to whether he meant to provoke a consideration of race through his commodity's whiteness. He has famously denounced art audience viewership, insisting that these street sale

performances were for the everyday viewer. Still, there is plenty of documentation of this performance; in these photographs, we now find art value through equal consideration of context and the suggested transaction (gesture again as hearsay). It is only because this artwork occurs for a presumably unaware public that his position is destabilized. Is he actually trying to make sales? Why would Hammons, with a respectable career and gallery, reduce himself to a joke? And what did that mean in 1983? Where Kaprow's aim was to blur the line between art and life for a viewer, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* collapsed artist and subject. In its art-value, Hammons's action becomes gesture—the symbolic activity nestled within the day-to-day hustle of New York vendors.

And so, returning to Agamben: the defining characteristic of gesture is “that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting.”¹⁰ For gesture in performance artwork, the goal is not structural production nor emotional charade.¹¹ Instead, Agamben describes these movements with two verbs (undertake, support) that connote accountability and responsibility. The relationship between the movement and the viewer is now greatly thickened, for the artist-as-subject is unavoidably linked to the former, and the public context becomes common ground. This heightens a sense of interpretable visual rhetoric, constructed by both artist and witness, within an uncontrolled yet shared sociological environment.



As disempowered viewers, considering Kado's walks is like chasing our own tails.

No one witnessed either artwork as such, and they may or may not have happened. The only thing to grasp are the words by which we learn of his performance, and yet language in and of itself does not convey the truth. Meaning is completely insecure, but it is precisely at this epistemological crux that Kado entrusts us with the work's interpretation. This is a generous move on his part—one that speaks against a moment when every piece of information seems quantifiable and verifiable.

A little while after hearing of these walks, I saw Klara Liden's 2003 video *Paralyzed* at The Museum of Modern Art. The footage begins with a solitary figure seated on a daytime commuter train, quietly staring out the window. Someone is filming and their hand is unsteady, the footage unpolished and poorly lit. The subject is hooded in an olive green woodsman coat, wearing black tennis shoes and slightly baggy, torn jeans. A quick cut jumps to the bare trees and scaffolding ostensibly outside the train. The video returns to this mysterious figure, who now slowly stands with outstretched arms and awkwardly prances in a circle. We see other passengers for the first time.

The figure starts to dance a jig to the accompaniment of post-production drums and squawking (later identified as “Paralyzed” by ‘60s psychobilly artist The Legendary Stardust Cowboy). The jacket comes off, revealing a loosely fitting pink blouse, auburn hair ponytailed beneath a short-billed cap, and a female body. It is Liden herself; she begins to swing from the bars of the train, rolls on the floor—all apparently of little concern to the other commuters. She tosses her shoes, and in a dead-bug freakout, she shimmies off her pants to uncover light blue basketball

shorts. Liden climbs on top of the luggage racks, pulls herself through and over seat partitions. The camera blurs as the videographer follows her down the middle of the train. She attempts some clunky gymnastics, then leaps up and down the aisle, garnering only a few lethargic glances. She does *The Worm*. The video jumps to another quick shot of industrial landscape, then ends with an exterior view of the train at a station. Glimpsed through the windows, something is slightly different; Liden is wearing her shoes and hat again, and the interior of the train is now artificially lit.

Reviewing the video, it becomes clear that this seemingly continuous performance is actually three freak-outs subtly pieced together; the camera blur and second exterior shot transition between different sequences. But in each performance Liden is wearing the same thing: light pink top and light blue basketball shorts, in marked contrast to her genderless initial costume. Obviously antithetical to the performer's figure are the sluggish other train passengers, set in their cultural coding, and seemingly unaware of the artwork rolling down the aisle. As the projection dims, we stand in the museum watching.

Notes:

1 Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), 140.

2 Agamben, 139.

3 Kaprow, Allan. "Untitled Guidelines for Happenings (c. 1965)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 709- 714.

4 Nitsch, Hermann. "The O.M. Theatre" in *Orgien Mysterien Theatre/ Orgies Mysteries Theater* (Darmstadt: März Verlag, 1969), 35-40.

5 Nitsch, "The Lamb Manifesto" in *Orgien Mysterien Theatre/Orgies Mysteries Theater*, 47-52.

6 Kovanda, Jiri. "Koller and Kovanda." New York: Ludlow38 Kunstverein München Goethe Institut, 2009, 4.

7 Kovanda, "Interview with Ján Mancuska." *Frieze*. Issue 113, March 2008, http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/jiri_kovanda/, accessed May.

8 Soviet forces and troops from several other Warsaw Pact countries invaded the former Czechoslovakia in 1968, ending the liberalization efforts of the Prague Spring. The Prague Spring was an attempt to partially democratize the country and bring additional rights to its citizens, including loosened restrictions on speech and travel. If Kovanda's performance were intended as an action, the emphasis would be the experience of Kovanda's wait. He might have a crowd, an audience, in a formalized exhibition space.

9 Ashley, Robert. *Outside of Time: Scores, Notes, Writings* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2009), 52-58.

10 Agamben, 140.

11 Agamben illustrates this with the distinction between playwright (producing/doing) and actor (enacting/acting).