

# Introduction.

## From Loss to Survivals: on the Reconstruction and Transmission of Artistic Gestures

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This Intervalla issue on *Loss and survivals: on the transmission and reconstruction of artistic gestures* brings together articles that explore mimicry, transfer and resurgence of gestures in artistic practices. The project has its roots in a panel session organised by the TETI Group (Textures and Experiences of Trans-Industriality) at the 2014 conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies at the University of Canberra. The authors look at different types of artistic practices, from performance art to painting and architectural drawing, thereby offering an insight into modes through which gestures can be worked upon as revealing materials in artistic production. The volume combines studies stemming from art historical perspectives, as well as artistic research and aesthetic reflections by artists. In doing so, it aims to shed light onto some fruitful pathways through which gestures can be purposefully conveyed by contemporary artistic strategies to reveal hidden textures of our individual and collective beings.

## FLOATING PASSAGES

In a dim-lit room in Philadelphia in 2005, hanging in mid-air, the long skeleton of a wooden hull shone above dark threatening rocks. The installation by the Northern Ireland artist Brian Kennedy was entitled *Passage*.<sup>1</sup> Passage: “the act of passing; movement from one place to another, transit; transition from one state to another; a voyage a crossing; a way by which one passes...”<sup>2</sup> In an essay written to accompany the work, Declan Long unfolded some of the potent associations that the floating gunwale frame carried for the artist and beholder, underlining in particular the journeying, both literal, as the traveler departs on the road or the seas to reach other lands and shores; and figurative, as the artist embarks on an imaginative path to discover new unmapped countries of the mind. Yet another set of associations connected these journeys to lingering, gliding collective practices and memories, with more ‘difficult’ and ‘dangerous’ undertones:

“...think, for instance, of the potential anxieties regarding the need to ‘pay for one passage’, or the threats that lurk behind the requirement of ‘safe passage’. Moreover, this sense of journeys as either fraught with hazards or involving complex social, cultural or psychological ‘bagage’ inevitably suggests the unconscious element that may be common to all apprehensions about journeys: that is, that the journey through life is also a journey towards death.

In this regard, we might note too the strong ritual significance in the idea of ‘passage’, and Kennedy’s use of the term undoubtedly invokes notions such as the ‘passage graves’ of ancient cultures...”<sup>3</sup>

Boats have long been used in many diverse cultures as symbols of the journey to the next world. Megalithic tombs were often adorned with such boats, the Egyptians built solar barks deemed to shine at night on the kingdom of the dead, Christians saw the naves of their churches as the arches that would guide them into the celestial world.<sup>4</sup> As Long remarked, Kennedy’s hull evoked not only a spatial movement, but a form of time-travelling that brought beholders in contact with distant collective pasts. On the other hand, *Passage* was also intimately connected to the artist’s personal experience as a lobster fisherman on the western coasts of Ireland as a young man. A personal experience of sea-faring mixed with stratas of collective memory in the Philadelphia installation.

## RITEs

A decade earlier in the Summer of 1991, Brian Kennedy had co-instigated with Alastair MacLennan, Nick Stewart and Brian Connolly an exhibition in Derry which explored such rites of passage in the contemporary age. The project entitled *Available Resources*, in reference to its meager financial resources, brought artists together to occupy and respond to an abandoned funeral parlour, in Derry, Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

The vacant William Adair parlour provided different historical resonances from one floor to another. The ground floor presented a business front, the first floor dated back to the 1950s, the second floor had kept its First World War decoration, while the top floor harbored a Victorian feel. These vertical layers reinforced the sentiment of the passing of time that the place through its original function immediately conveyed. Interventions and installations in the building fed themselves on invisible spectral layers. Not

<sup>1</sup> Brian Kennedy, *Passage* (Belfast: Golden Thread Gallery, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *The Cassell Dictionary and Thesaurus*.

<sup>3</sup> Declan Long, “Passage”, in Brian Kennedy, *Passage*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopédie des symboles* (Paris: Librairie générale française) 76.

<sup>5</sup> Slavka Sverakova & John Nixon, eds, *Available Resources* (Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1991).

Slavka Sverakova, Wandel B. Campbell & Nathalie Perreault, “Available resources: Derry, juin et juillet 1991”, *Inter: art actuel*, n.53 (1992), 38-45.

solely that of the parlour's past daily business, the men dressed in black and the bodies of the departed, the community coming to pay its last homage. But also that of the lives beyond the parlour, memories of those men and women as active, or contemplative, but embodied in the streets of Derry, and of the city of Derry itself as an embodied entity. Kennedy on this occasion had worked with a light touch, by filling some cracks in the walls of one of the disused building's rooms with white plaster. *Remains Intact* used an everyday gesture of the bricklayer, as well as suggested the capacity of the artist to bring healing, to fill in the inevitable gaps brought about by the passing of time.

In reflecting on the 'modus operandi' of *Available Resources*, the artist Alastair McLennan reflected on the term 'lean means', used to describe conditions of artistic production where the acquisition of materials to put on a show are severely limited. Faced with 'lean means', artists could somehow go back to the heart of their trade:

"How can you make something effective that you are satisfied with if there isn't really much money there for buying materials? Artists can, especially if they are doing performance, focus on imagination (...) You rely then much more on simply the actual as it is, and use that as a material."<sup>6</sup>

The actual is not to be understood as a blank canvas: McLennan's *actuations*<sup>7</sup> take place in a moment of presence, yet can carry with them a range of historical layers. In Derry, MacLennan performed a meticulously timed one-hour circumvolution around the Diamond square in the city centre, in the middle of which stands a memorial to soldiers fallen during the First and Second World War. The work revisited traditional military rituals, from both Northern Ireland and beyond, twisted into a rite of secular contemporary exorcism; MacLennan, wearing both Unionist and Republican colors,<sup>8</sup> carried a globe around his neck; however, this symbol of unity unexpectedly broke at the very end of the performance.<sup>9</sup>

## A CABINET OF GESTURES

Cracks that are mended, and cracks that reappear; journeys in the present that summon voyages of the past. Gestures that use and conceal other gestures. In his 2017 *Treaty of gestures*, the literary writer Charles Dantzig playfully proposed to write a 'gestuary', listing gestures ranging from 'gesture with the hands', and 'gestures with the mouth', to 'gestures of singers' and 'gestures of tyranny'.<sup>10</sup> In each of the dictionary's entries, Dantzig traces cultural filiations of particular gestures, seen from an unapologetic personal perspective. The 'gestures with the cigarette' are that of an intensification, where 'a woman could feel more womanly, and a man more manly', with archetypes to be found in popular cinema, Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Bette Davis in *All about Eve*, David Hemmings in *Blow up*; 'military gestures' are encapsulated by a heavy hanging hand, sign of mighty casualness, that moves into a discussion of the elegant control of Géricault's *Cuirassier leaving the field of battle* on horseback (1814), before considering the 'regulated' nature of the soldier's gestures. This 'gesturology' is not without its pendant in the traditional reading of images: the *Iconologia* of Cesare Ripa tells painters which attributes should feature in allegorical depictions, but also the appropriate postures to

<sup>6</sup> Alastair MacLennan in conversation with the author, the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Actuation* is the term favoured by the artist to describe his performative interventions.

<sup>8</sup> The colours refer to Protestant and Catholic communities, which in the context of Northern Ireland carried a particular weight, given the resurgence of violent conflict from the 1960s to the 1990s.

<sup>9</sup> In her critical essay on the work of Alastair McLennan featuring in *Alastair McLennan. Is No. 1975 – 1988* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 1988), 7-17, Slavka Sverakova underlines the recurrence of interplays between opposites in the work of the performer, that contribute to unveil and release *intensities*. She describes the breaking of the globe in *Available Resources*, 33. The split is also noted by Liam Kelly in *Thinking Long: contemporary art in the north of Ireland* (Kinsale: Gandon editions, 1996), 134, who describes it as "a life/death rift".

<sup>10</sup> Charles Dantzig, *Traité des gestes* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2017).

use: *'discrezione'* should be represented as a woman of motherly aspect, wearing a cloth of gold, raising her left arm with an open hand in sign of compassion.<sup>11</sup> Consciously or unconsciously, a *mimetic* process is at work; the anthropologist Marcel Jousse stressed the anthropoid's capacity to 'interactional mimicry', characterized by 're-play', through which the perceptions of external expressions are recorded by humans, who are then able to reproduce them, in a memory of gestures.<sup>12</sup>

An interest in human gestures as vessels capable of guiding us into deep caves full of hidden secrets, or perhaps scriptures, has led to a number of different and sometimes antagonistic perspectives on human nature over the past century. Hence anthropology from the 19<sup>th</sup> century has looked at 'primitive' communities in which bodies were seen as the bearers of ancestral memories.<sup>13</sup> Sociology found in behavioral patterns a key to understand structural determinisms, from Emile Durkheim's work on rituals and religion (1912), to Pierre Bourdieu's early studies in Kabylie.<sup>14</sup> Structuralism in that respect could highlight how collective memories of gestures bypass individual agency, seeing in the individual body a mere pawn in the greater machinery of discursive formations;<sup>15</sup> and simultaneously stress the arbitrary and conventional nature of gestures, engulfed within an overarching system of signification, split from any essentialist urge or memory.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, phenomenology explored gestures as a privileged link to natural expression, and an embodiment of our 'being in the world'.<sup>17</sup> The performative reaches out into the inner self to channel pure expressivity. In her introductory notes to *Migrations of gestures*, co-edited with Sally Ann Ness, Carrie Noland navigates these different literatures in order to confront the opposition between gestures understood as systemic, governed by an underlying grid, and gestures perceived as privileged conducts of subjectivity. In balancing superstructural forces with individual agency, Noland points to the need to "see gesture as supporting the survival of the past while potentially engendering meanings that bear that past towards an unpredictable future."<sup>18</sup> While socio-historical stratas inform the articulation of gestures, their actualization in the present (in the event of the present) singles them out in a fruitful *constructive* and *differential* process.

## RE-SET

"Pathosformel: the signifying over-determination of familiar anthropomorphic representations".<sup>19</sup> In his reading of Aby Warburg's art historical legacy, Georges Didi-Huberman points to the spectral lineages unearthed by the attention to the *nachleben* of images, the symptomatic survivals of forms through time. An image may hide another image, to refer to the 2009 exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, which looked at 'double-images', where a basket of fruit might reveal a woman's face, a group of naked bodies a skull.<sup>20</sup> In Warburg's final grand oeuvre, the revealing juxtapositions of visual motifs arranged on black boards entitled 'mnemosyne', and originally to be seen at the heart of his library in Hamburg, a representative example would be the emergence behind the Kanephoros nymph of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Life of St John the Baptist*

<sup>11</sup> Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Roma, 1593)

<sup>12</sup> Marcel Jousse, *L'anthropologie du geste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974)

<sup>13</sup> Colin Counsell, "Introduction", in *Performance, embodiment and cultural memory*, (Colin Counsell & Roberta Mock, eds (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Colin Counsell, "Introduction", in *Performance, embodiment and cultural memory*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969)

<sup>16</sup> Carrie Noland, "Introduction", in *Migrations of gesture*, Carrie Noland & Sally Ann Ness, eds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) XI-XII

<sup>17</sup> Carrie Noland, "Introduction", in *Migrations of gesture*. X-XI

<sup>18</sup> Carrie Noland, "Introduction", in *Migrations of gesture*. X

<sup>19</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 2002) 225. "la surdétermination signifiante des représentations anthropomorphes familières".

<sup>20</sup> *Une image peut en cacher une autre: Arcimboldo, Dali, Raetz* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2009).

(1490) of a victory figure erupting from Roman Antiquity.<sup>21</sup> Yet with regards to the memory of gestures, the question of survivals depends upon ‘a certain montage of time.’ Far from establishing a canonical iconology, or gesturology, and not to be mistaken with the archetypes of Carl Gustav Jung,<sup>22</sup> the ‘pathosformel’ stands in between the animal pulsion and the iteration of cultural history, in an anachronistic relation to the present. The logic in the superposition and survivals of forms is not a straightforward motorway. The resurgence of forms in time proceeds through imprints, but also displacements, and inversions. With noticeable parallels with the Freudian’s return of the repressed, and with the Nietzschean eternal return, which Gilles Deleuze explored through difference in repetition,<sup>23</sup> the survivals of gestures carry a dramatic intensity inherited from the pit of humans’ history, and desires. With regards to the constructive potential of gestures, the pathosformel also helpfully points to a differential matrix at the heart of the repetition of formal motifs.

Our interest in the present collection of essays is to look at the potential of some of the ideas briefly outlined above for artistic strategies today in the context of artistic research and practice. When resetting gestures, artistic practices then might on the one hand find much to chew on in the social and historical textures that have informed and shaped those gestures from both times immemorial to their most recent inflexions. They can also on the other hand choose to work on the ever mutating surges of dionysiac explosions. Passages can be built between distant entities in order to bridge what might have appeared as an impossible gap between the present and the past. In a reflection on the Greek tragedy entitled *Le tombeau d’Œdipe, pour une tragédie sans tragique* (2012), William Marx pondered on the remoteness of the dramatic genre, known to us through highly fragmentary sources.<sup>24</sup> To try and gain some access to the forgotten world of Greek tragedy, he pointed to the Noh theatre in the Japanese tradition. Through a displacement of the focal lenses from the integrity of the text to a contextual reflection and comparison on the performative act, the author could unearth crucial indications enabling a reconstruction of the genre’s historical specificity. Albeit distant in space and time, the actors of the Noh theatre could provide unique clues as to the nature of the Greek experience. Passages can also be traced in the material at hand, one that we believe to see in its entirety, only to reveal its singular position at the crossroads of multiple rhizomic trajectories. The project *The technical unconscious* organized at a stone mason cooperative in Porto by Ines Moreira and Gonçalo Leite Velho in 2013-14 exemplarily combined the use of existent working gestures, evocation and convocation of past gestures in the trade, and the unconscious transmission of gestures, in a trans-industrial space.<sup>25</sup> Whether aiming to resurrect a lost entity, or to build on the unknown facets of an existing one, artistic exploration can invest in both a cabinet of gestures, organized but non-prescriptive, and the cracks in the items on show, both roads leading to a re-visitation and potentially constructive alteration through inventive mediation.

## THIS VOLUME

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<sup>21</sup>Joseph Leo Koerner, “introduction”, in Aby Warburg, *Le rituel du serpent* (Paris: Macula, 2015) 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> C.G. Jung, *Les métamorphoses de l’âme et ses symboles* (Paris: le livre de Poche, 2014, first ed. 1950).

<sup>23</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).

<sup>24</sup> William Marx, *Le tombeau d’Œdipe. Pour une tragédie sans tragique* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2012).

<sup>25</sup><[http://softcontrol.fba.up.pt/curatorial.php?detail\\_id=curatorial](http://softcontrol.fba.up.pt/curatorial.php?detail_id=curatorial)>

materials in artistic production. The volume combines studies stemming from art historical perspectives, as well as artistic research and aesthetic reflections by artists. In doing so, it aims to shed light onto some fruitful pathways through which gestures can be purposefully conveyed by contemporary artistic strategies to reveal hidden textures of our individual and collective beings.

Gerald Gordon looks at such transfers in the work of Japanese Kyoto-based *butoh* dancer Yasuo Fukurozaka. In his discussion of a performance piece by Fukurozaka entitled *Prince's Moonlight*, Gordon traces the interlaces between improvised dance techniques associated with *butoh*, an avant-garde performative practice which emerged in the 1960s in Japan, and the more traditional *noh* theatre. A *noh* mask used by Fukurozaka in his performance serves as a channel between the two performative genres, between past and present theatrical performance, and between the body of the performer and the active participation of the audience through collaborative imagination.

In the following essay, Gareth Jones reflects on his artistic walking practice, posited at the crossroads between Eastern and Western traditions, historic and contemporary aesthetics. Central to his reflection is the notion of *borrowed scenery*, inherited from the *Yuanyue*, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese treaty on garden design. Jones evokes references to contemporary relational aesthetics, before analysing historic and contemporary definitions of *borrowed scenery*, whereby the borders between internal and external spaces and time become blurred. Highlighting the benefits of understanding this borrowing as a fluid process, Jones ends by a discussion of *Widdershins Osaka*, a walking piece inspired by both these Western and Eastern perspectives, which he first organised in Japan in 2016.

The superposition of Eastern and Western practices is also the focus of Lori Gibbs's essay on Chinese architectural drawing techniques of the 1930s. Gibbs points to the importation to China of US working drawings methods by Chinese architects trained in America. In a troubled period rocked by civil war and the Sino-Japanese war, as well as pressure from modernization processes, the use of modern orthographic drawings in the documentation of Chinese architectural buildings could play a significant role in the affirmation of a national historical heritage. Discussing in particular the drawings of architect Liang Sicheng, Gibbs explores the manner through which 'scientific' architectural drawings were seen as instrumental in the recovery of past architectural gestures, and as such could channel a distinctive form of historical knowledge.

A contrasted relation between artistic gesture and history is similarly explored by Gil Lavi in his reflection on the work of the artist Edward Krasinski. Krasinski in the 1960s and 1970s developed a practice involving the taping of a blue line, a strip of blue painter's tape, onto objects, images and people. Lavi finds in this taping gesture a striking parallel with the photographic medium, in their joint capacity for transparency as well as opacity, in similar operations of framing and doubling reality, of recording and obstructing the past and the present. As such, Krasinski's gesture reveals the often ambivalent processes active in the representation of cultural heritage, when the visible surface can obscure its underlying textures.

Visibility and invisibility are also at the heart of Johanna Bruckner's notes on her artistic practice, which explores the impact of urban transformation in Hamburg's HafenCity, Germany. In a former busy harbour district of the industrial era that came into hardships, former warehouses have been the object of public and corporate investment in recent decades. Bruckner unveils the contradictions behind Social Mix policies in the HafenCity, and the exploitive conditions of labour employed in the conversion of the area. The dance score devised with the performers on site channels and challenges technological and infrastructural forces into a bodily iteration of an alternate collective social vision.

Gestures are evoked through their many appearances, familiar and unfamiliar faces surging onto and behind the canvas, in Magnus Clausen's discussion of his pictorial practice with Gabriel Gee. Clausen reflects on a number of operations he has been exploring in his work, outlining a range of gestures used in the pictorial process together with the different paths they open up to the painter. Repetition, remembrance, assemblage, addition and erasure are amongst the recurring tropes employed through diverse alchemic

variations by Clausen in a range of technical experiments that portray the multi-folded visage of his contemporary pictorial practice.

Finally, artist Delphine Chapuis-Schmitz reaches back to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé ground breaking 1897 text entitled *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, and the 1969 re-reading of Mallarmé's 'dice throw' by the Belgium poet turned visual artist Marcel Broodthaers. The object of Chapuis-Schmitz's reflection is the neutralisation of the radical gesture in our contemporary global media societies. Through Broodthaers, she unveils a path towards another understanding of gestures, that leads away from the banalization of the disruptive to an empowerment of the reader. In the proliferation of readings and re-enactments of the original text, an alternate to the ebullient transgressive turned normative can map a hopeful emancipatory horizon for our collective future.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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