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Emerging and Revealing

Isabel Holle

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Emerging and Revealing – Gestures in Theory, Language and Art

There is a phrase in German that says ‘Das ist *nur* eine Geste!’, ‘It’s *just* a gesture!’, meaning something like a symbolic sign or appreciation to a certain circumstance: flowers for the birthday girl, a note of thanks in an acknowledgement or the condolence card for a funeral. However, these gestures contain something fundamentally social and symbolic that is not just a nice-to-have or an add-on to something verbally expressed, but a face-saving measure in certain social situations. If the flowers are missing, the ‘Thank you!’ remains silent or the condolence card lacks the black stripe and shows two kissing cows instead, the previously ‘small’ gesture quickly becomes an irritation, perhaps even an unforgivable *faux pas*. Degraded to a small addition, a supplement in everyday language (*just* a gesture), the small gesture nevertheless develops a social and cultural clout that makes me wonder. Of course, the gesture expresses and produces communicational content that can hardly be realized by means of verbal expressions. The gesture is therefore often considered as a prime example of performativity, because it conveys and produces its communicative and semantic content at the same time. But what exactly constitutes this apparently special character of the gesture, which oscillates between physicality and materiality on the one hand, and a symbolic sign or mark on the other?

Recent research, which has also reached literary and cultural studies, focuses on the cognitive science approach to explain psychological and physiological specifics of the gesture and its role in communication, human behavior or even art. These cognitive and linguistic approaches generate a starting point for their research from opposing knowledge and materiality, language and body, in order to subsequently transfer them into one term called ‘embodiment’. Although theories like linguistic multimodality or current research on 4E cognition strive for a perspective that perceives the gesture as something more than a non-verbal addition to speech, they nevertheless place it in opposition to the classical conception of language and, above all, of scripture (cf. Dulley, Kukkonen). Contemporary cultural and literary studies, on the other hand, focus on body-art-approaches or production-aesthetic peculiarities of the gesture, especially in visual arts. In these approaches the gesture functions as a form of hermaphroditic body-sign, pointing towards a new kind of materiality: an embodied practice. In the attempt to describe interactions and interferences between both sides of the gesture, namely of body and mind, a phenomenological micro-space emerges, for which ‘*just* a gesture’ remains the appropriate description. But what happens, if the term ‘gesture’ shows up not besides the body, the speech act or a cultural marker, but in the neighborhood of the term ‘scripture’? Some of the brightest minds have dealt with this question, sometimes in a dedicated and extensive way, sometimes comparatively casually. And what they discovered seems like the moment of fame for our small gesture.

In 1996 Giorgio Agamben, whom we do not consult here on questions related to the Covid pandemic or current politics, writes: “*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 ethi-

cal dimension for them” (57). Following Agamben, the previously cited attempts to describe the gesture as a bare means of communication, a psycho-physiological state or a specific way of *producing* art fail to grasp the special role of the gesture as a form of *being-in-language*. Rather, and here I quote Agamben again,

[...] it means, to expose the word in its own mediality, in its own being a means, without any transcendence. The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say, because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality. However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language. (57)

In this respect, the gesture reveals an epistemological problem that philosophers and artists have been addressing since the dawn of modernity: the desire and yet impossibility to show, transport or produce reliable or even stable order by the means of language. Language as a medium, a material, has the insidious quality of being subject to constant change and, due to its disseminated structure, which Derrida calls “[t]his essential drifting [of] writing as an iterative structure [...]” (Derrida 1985, 316), of constantly jeopardizing the establishment of a stable order. The word or sentence is therefore always constructed on an abyss that includes the failure of and the desire for communication in every possible meaning of the word – and the gesture puts its fingers in this wound.

In that sense, the gesture is exactly the form-giving power that is able to reveal the double-bind nature (desire and impossibility) of language without using means of representation. As Werner Hamacher points out, this is not exclusively a bodily mediality; words can be gestures too and, especially in literature, they often are. According to him, the gesture is the crossing of language into what is no longer language and is therefore the speaking of mere language, namely, its gesture (319). At this point, the gesture, while still having the status of a supplement, moves dangerously close to the center of language: the speaking of *mere* language. It paradoxically seems like the gesture in language points into the direction of its own limitations right at the heart of the action: The gesture secretly gets rid of its communicational boundaries and the underlying economics of intention and efficiency. From this place, right in the middle of the action, it reveals a point in language, where desire and impossibility clash beautifully and familiar oppositions of play and being, of *signifié* and *signifiant*, become pointless – and by that, it gets especially interesting for art. Looking at a drawing by Franz Kafka, the gesture as a “speaking of mere language”, as an endeavor that exposes desire and impossibility alike, becomes tangible.



Figure 1: Franz Kafka: *Der Läufer* (ca. 1901-1907), Ink on Paper, 6.3 x 13 cm, © The Literary Estate of Max Brod, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem, Foto: Ardon Bar Hama.

Titled as *Der Läufer* 'The Runner', what we see here, is a truly fleeting runner figure. The legs are far apart, hardly standing but rather floating, the footwork is more reminiscent of gusts of wind or clouds of dust than of human legs. The curved lines are movements of a runner themselves, marks he or she might leave behind as they run. A pure gesture of running. Kafka's runner is exactly what the drawing reveals. Nothing else, not more or less, but exactly that. It gets close to a movement of running that differs fundamentally from an actual image of a person running. The pleasure and movement of running emerges from this drawing, while it is more or less impossible to recognize a human figure in it. The image does not say, explain or show anything; it –in Derrida's sense– marks: "A meaning-resistant place in a system that is utterly designed for meaning" (Hamacher, 299, my translation). In *The Pleasure in Drawing* (original title: *Le plaisir au dessin*), Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

The gesture for which drawing offers us the essence and excellence [...], this gesture is above all what is most proper to a *gesture*: an immanent *significance*, 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 receives it, coming from beyond its functional corporeality. (39)

The drawing as a gesture of an 'outline' whose line contains the crack (The homophony of the name 'Cragg' is happily recognized here): The drawing tears up or tears apart –in the first place probably the white sheet of paper– but often also its own form, which occasionally shows itself to be permeable to the paper and its space. The primal movement of the drawing is therefore not the pure 'formed' form, but the formlessness, the fragmentation and always the flight from form, the copy or a model. By scratching tracks into the smooth surface, the drawing contains its very own, unforeseen dynamism and, thus, an openness. The drawing takes place in the form of a search – that leaves its marks. It is *open* form.

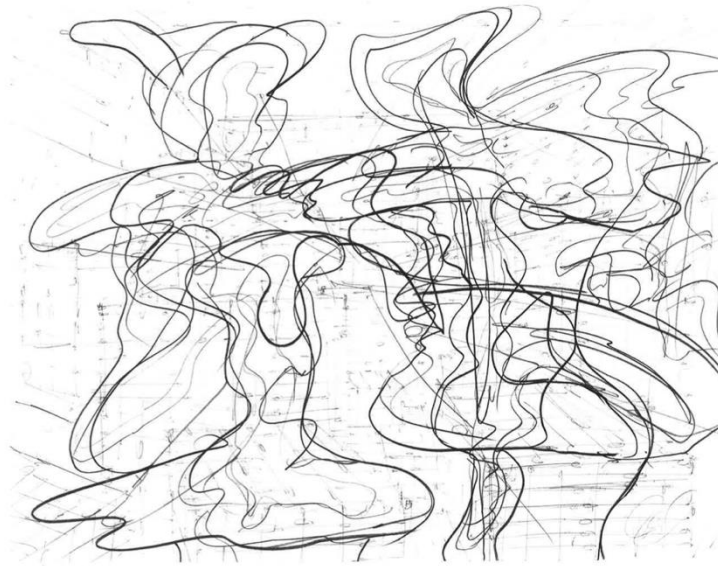


Figure 2: Tony Cragg: *Untitled* (2001), Pencil on Paper, 35 x 27.2 cm, © Cragg Foundation.

Tony Cragg's drawings lead a life of their own that sometimes makes orientation and clear assignment difficult. Superimposed and often merging lines of varying strength add at least a third dimension to the two-dimensional paper and create a space, in which clear fixed points elude and which, nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of this, invites the viewer into this world of overlapping and stacked dimensions. Looking at Figure 2, it occasionally feels as if you have landed in a kind of space-time continuum, in which beginning and end, entrance and exit are no longer tangible, but also no longer relevant. Clearly defined form, the formed form on the one hand, and the constantly renewing form on the other, come together in an indissoluble tension that creates pleasure – according to Nancy one of the most original characteristics (and task) of art. The formed form is alive, as Cragg's drawings show, with proliferating, quivering form boundaries that break down in a certain determining sense. Its lines transcend the outer limits of form towards an agile and playful contour that sets and disperses form in the same breath. Protruding and protruding the outlines of a 'formed' form, the (gesture of) drawing literally puts a spanner in the works and, this way, creates precisely the pleasure that Nancy recognizes in the tension of standing off from oneself (28). Figure 3 is playing with this tension by creating a *Livingroom*, where the three-dimensional gets manipulated by thin to thick lines in the foreground. It takes a while before the sofa set in the background becomes visible – and even longer to recognize the human figures on the seating furniture.

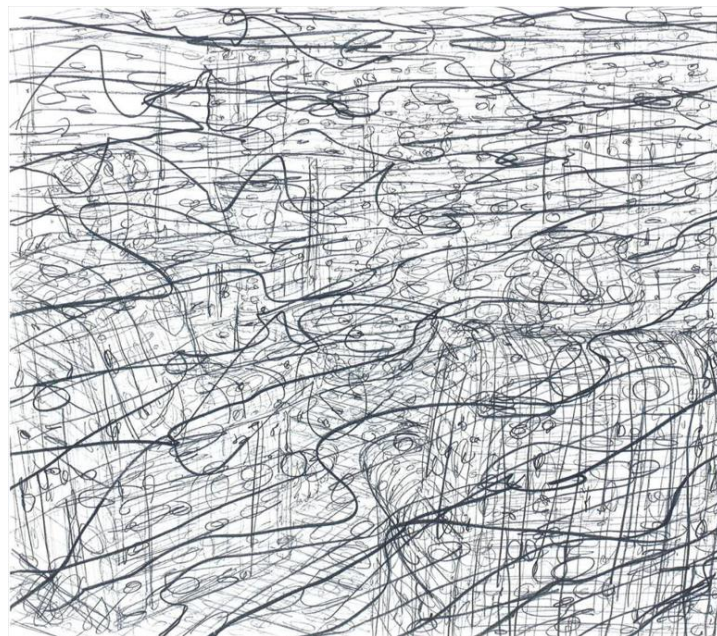


Figure 3: Tony Cragg: *Livingroom* (2008), Pencil on Paper, 35 x 27.2 cm, © Cragg Foundation.

The gesture, thus, sets a relation to *self*: Manifesting itself, in this way the subject comes to distance itself from its self and can experience pleasure and pain, in other words, the “expansion or retraction of its being” (28). It creates a hiatus between self and self (Nancy 28); a hiatus that language is well-aware of. The resulting pleasure and pain that this distance creates refers back to the previously mentioned ‘desire for’ and ‘impossibility to’: an insurmountable and ever-renewing distance that enters the field of art as well as of language and subjectivity. By that, “[...] the gesture of art in general, and of a drawing in particular, does not aim for the repletion or discharge of a tension but rather the opening and revival or resurgence of an intensity” (27). The gesture becomes a theoretical figure of emergence, where repetition and varying patterns create new properties, new forms.



Figure 4: Tony Cragg: *Untitled* (2010), Pencil on Paper, 31 x 35.2 cm, © Cragg Foundation.

Lines of flight in the direction of a-figuration, at the limit of what form can still endure, provide precisely what makes the reception of those works enjoyable: “So what exactly is this contact between pencil and paper? An exchange of gentleness, like a caress or a taking flight” (Nancy 35). In Cragg’s autonomous forms, this “juxtaposition of the shaping and the formed form/force” (21), which Nancy defines as a characteristic of the drawing, takes place, revealing the tension inherent in it and its (“perverted”) pleasure. Freed from the need to represent, Figure 4 shows towering, multiplying human profiles, the number of which far exceeds the two figures originally laid out at the bottom of the drawing. Similar, yet always distinct, heads stack and line up on the two torsos, conveying figures whose conception cannot be read otherwise than as a collective. The contours of these figures drift outwards to the edge of what is still recognizable under the term “figure(s)”, yet remain excitingly perceptible. Cragg’s drawing thus –and lightly, with “a very fine file” (Deleuze/Guattari, 160)– suspends the idea of subjectivity and unity (shown by a closed form), in favor of an open gestural game of form.

The drawing in general and Tony Cragg’s in particular are characterized by gestures of deviation, fragmentation and dispersion: deviations of form from form and deviation from the drawing’s target in general. They are marginal figures in two senses: marginal figures on the one hand, because they push form or figure to a limit that is often hardly perceptible or categorizable as such, and thus raise important questions about the representability of form and figure at all. Marginal figures, however, also because the medium of the drawing itself, by dividing this (one) white sheet of paper, is always a form of demarcation that separates form from non-form. They carry this limit, this distance, within themselves. By that, they lead us into a form of contemplation, that “[...] does not consume what it contemplates – through contemplation, it renews its hunger and thirst” (18). What we initially got to know as a small gesture, as an addition or supplement, turns out to be an utterly pleasant and excitingly heterogeneous phenomenon that passes through all kinds of material –the body, language and even visual material like the drawing– and by that leads us down to sometimes scary yet fascinating locations. The gesture turns out to be a truly transmedial phenomenon, where the pleasure and impossibility to approach art and get *hold* of it beautifully collide.

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Περίληψη

Isabel Holle

Ανάδυση και αποκάλυψη – Χειρονομίες στη θεωρία, στη γλώσσα και στην τέχνη

Η φιγούρα της χειρονομίας εμφανίζεται σε ποικίλα καλλιτεχνικά είδη, όπως και στην επιστημονική έρευνα. Περνώντας μέσα από διαφορετικά υλικά –φυσικά υλικά, όπως το σώμα, νοητικά υλικά, όπως η γλώσσα και οπτικά υλικά, όπως το σχέδιο– αυτό που ενοποιεί αυτές τις διαφορετικές χειρονομίες είναι οι συγκεκριμένες μορφές αντίστασης σε ένα σύστημα νοήματος. Περισσότερο εκφράζουν μορφές ύπαρξης σε ένα μέσο καθαυτό παρά επανασυστήνουν ή μεταθέτουν καλλιτεχνικά ζητήματα. Συνεπώς, οι χειρονομίες εμφανίζονται ως φιγούρες εκεί που η άβυσσος μεταξύ της απόλαυσης του καλλιτεχνικού βιώματος και της αδυναμίας αποκωδικοποίησης νοήματος γίνεται απτή. Εκτός του ότι εμπεριέχουν μια (απολαυστική) καλλιτεχνική εμπειρία, αυτό που αποκαλύπτουν είναι συγκεκριμένες μορφές απορητικού χαρακτήρα, οι οποίες με τη σειρά τους δίνουν πρόσβαση σε ένα πεδίο ανάδυσης, όπου διάφορα μοτίβα μορφοποιούνται, αναμορφώνονται και ανανεώνονται χωρίς να γίνονται σταθερά ή αυτοτελή. Στον υβριδικό της ρόλο μεταξύ υλι(κότητας) και (μη) νοήματος, η χειρονομία διατηρεί την ίδια τη μορφή μη κορεσμένη και έτσι όχι μόνο επιτρέπει την ευχάριστη ενατένιση, αλλά αφήνει επίσης ένα ίχνος προς την κρυμμένη γνώση που εσωκλείεται στην τέχνη.