

POETRY MOVEMENT GESTURE

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I am currently investigating the relationship between innovative poetry and movement practices, both from a critical and creative point of view. I have been exploring the relationship between my poetry and my involvement in a movement practice called Five Rhythms (Roth, 1989, 1997, 2004) for some years now, and have recently started practising Contact Improvisation (Paxton, 1972) with a view to developing new performances which combine movement and language. My critical work has focused on a bundle of entangled practices emerging around the work of the New York City-based Judson Dance Theater (1962-66) and subsequent postmodern dance practices in New York and elsewhere. One work of particular interest is a book of dance-instruction poems written by the poet Jackson Mac Low (1922-2004) called *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (1964, pub 1979), a performance of which, directed by his daughter Clarinda Mac Low and entitled *40 Dancers Do 40 Dances for The Dancers*, I attended over three nights in New York in September 2012. Mac Low's contemporary Simone Forti (b. 1935) – for whom he specifically compiled a set of dance instruction cards for use in movement improvisation called 'Nuclei for Simone Forti' – also uses language and movement in performance and choreography, and I was fortunate to participate in a workshop with her during my visit to New York. Forti also performed the Nuclei text within the structure of the *40 Dancers* piece. Among the next generation of New York cross-genre artists post-Judson to be interested in exploring the relationship between movement and language are the dancer Sally Silvers (who also performed in *40 Dancers*) and poet Bruce Andrews – one of the key figures of Language Poetry. I interviewed Silvers and Andrews in New York about their collaborative work together.

Taken together these artists offer a triangulation of possibilities about the relationship between movement and language. Mac Low wrote texts for dancers to realise in movement, with or without verbalisation. Andrews and Silvers spontaneously select and improvise from their material with Silvers responding to Andrews' poetry primarily as sound as well as for its meaning. Simone Forti's practice, which she calls 'Logomotion', offers a kind of synthesis of these possibilities in her spontaneous generation of text and movement during improvisation, albeit that she often draws on some pre-existing written material. The role of text changes substantially across these practices as do the relationships between the body of the writer and of the dancer – Mac Low is the originator of texts which dancers then perform, whereas Silvers as dancer and Andrews as poet and dancer interact in the same space. In Forti's case, writer and dancer contained within one body.

I have been using gesture theory as a way of thinking about these practices. Gesture has a complex history as a term in dance theory, and alters its meaning across a variety of discourses. I am particularly interested in the term's potential for illuminating how the gestures of movement in, say, postmodern dance, find themselves in dialogue with certain

kinds of analogous, and actual, gestures in postmodern poetry. What could these distinct areas of gestural practice have to say to one another and why have such a conversation?

Since at least Mallarmé and Valéry, the conversation between dance and poetry has been proceeding apace, but more recent studies such as Carrie Noland's *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009) and the volume Noland co-edited with Sally Ann Ness, *Migrations of Gesture* (2008), demonstrate the current state of cross-disciplinary studies of gesture. In Noland's introduction to *Migrations*, she describes a field which explores the tension between the understanding of gesture as representation and as presentation. In *Agency and Embodiment*, Noland argues that 'gestures give shape to affects that might not have precise, codified or translatable meanings' (Noland, p. xiii), partly enabled by the gap between regimes of trained, repeatable and signifying gestures, and the unique individual performing those gestures at a given time and place. In this Noland follows Flusser's provisional definition of gesture as 'a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation' (*Gesten*, 1991). For Noland, gesture can transmit codified meaning but it can also crucially overflow that meaning by its conveying of an 'energy charge, or "vitality affect"' (p. xiv) This view has a ready applicability to literary studies – not least because the use of terms like energy charge or vitality resonate in the poetics of Modernism and Romanticism respectively – but because they seem also to relate to how language functions in a literary text – to communicate, but also to foreground the materiality of language, as gesture.

Part of what is at stake in Noland's dialectical reading of gesture is nothing less than a kind of rapprochement between post-structuralism and phenomenology, arguing – via Thomas Csordas – that gesture can lead us to an 'appreciation of embodiment and being-in-the-world alongside textuality and representation' (p. xiv). This position is suggestive for thinking about how language and movement interact in the practice of the artists that I am currently concerned with, all of whom, in various ways, seem intent on dramatizing the relationship between embodiment and textuality.

I'll begin with the realisation of Jackson Mac Low's poems by Clarinda Mac Low, marking what would have been the poet's ninetieth birthday. Mac Low's book of forty dance-instruction poems written in 1964 were composed algorithmically using a constrained body of material, that is, fifty-six index cards on which were written one to five actions such as 'jumping', 'having a letter over one eye', 'mapping' – amounting to 173 different actions. For each poem, Mac Low chose a pronoun from the Merriam-Webster dictionary and used it as a kind of acrostic key to select actions from the cards. Any pronoun occurring in the original text was then replaced by the governing pronoun for that poem. Due to the chance element, many actions occur more than once in different poems, but get transformed in each case, by the changing pronoun. Hence:

Later I quietly chalk a strange tall bottle (6th dance)

Afterwards we quietly chalk a strange tall bottle (8th dance)

One begins by quietly chalk a strange tall bottle (9th dance)

Other variants include altering the markers of temporal sequence (begins, afterwards etc) to respond to each poem's emerging structure. Jackson Mac Low's instructions to would-be performers ask that performances of the work should clearly convey 'the *integrity* of each dance – its having a definite beginning, middle, & end' (Mac Low, p. 67). He requires dancers to 'find *some definite interpretation of the meaning of every line*' and to 'carefully

work out the time-relations between the various actions’ (p. 67). Although Mac Low insists that ‘no line or series of lines may be left uninterpreted & unrealised simply because it seems too complicated or obscure to realise as movement (&/or sound or speech),’ (p. 67) he certainly does not specify how these interpretations should be undertaken, thus giving considerable freedom to the performer. Crucially there is an invitation to realise the poems as speech, despite the poems being primarily offered as texts to be realised as movement.

In the fifty-nine realisations of the pieces I witnessed in New York, an astonishing array of strategies were applied to all forty dances, and then multiple versions of some of them. One realisation is of particular interest as it incorporates a writing performance, as poet E.J. McAdams writes the text of the 22nd Dance onto acetate on an overhead projector, projecting the words onto the ceiling at the same time as Carolyn Hall responded to the poem in movement.¹ This device was repeated once or twice during the three nights of performances. Due to the performance being conducted in the round with a mobile audience, depending on one’s proximity to the projection one *might* have been able to read some of the lines of the poem emerging, but making the text lucidly available to the audience in this way did not seem to be the primary intention. Instead, McAdams’ writing seems to be a way of staging the gesture of writing in parallel, perhaps even in dialogue with, the unfolding precision of Hall’s movements. Hall’s exacting use of her hands in this segment as a kind of measuring device – like a compass or caliper – was a characteristic feature of her performances throughout *40 Dancers*. It’s possible that this distinctive and curiously syntactical gesture – in that it appears to mark out relationships between different parts of the dancer’s body – is Hall’s interpretation of the action ‘who sees lines’ in the text and may be actually demonstrating a kind of idiokinetic exercise for visualising lines of connection in the body. At any rate, the movement and the linguistic phrase seem aligned here (with ‘line’ also readable meta-textually as referring to a ‘line’ of the poem) and this is further dramatised with the projected text appearing above Hall’s head, suggesting that her movements may be responding to, even guided by, the movement of the emerging writing or that the hand writing is responding to Hall’s movement. Henri Michaux’s asemic writing is an instance – almost without parallel – of writing understood as gesture, and Noland’s work on Michaux in *Agency and Embodiment* is framed by her account of numerous episodes in continental philosophy (Hegel, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida) which reflect on the act of writing as kinesthetic gesture. Noland is wary however of treating the kinesthetic as a site of privileged truth. Writing receives the imprint of cultural norms as much as other bodily gestures, yet it retains a radical, disruptive potential. The combination of written gesture and movement gesture in Hall and McAdams’s realisation of Mac Low’s 22nd Dance comments upon and dramatises this state of affairs in quite an open way, without promoting one set of possibilities more than the other.

Simone Forti began dancing with the influential Anna Halprin in San Francisco in the late nineteen fifties. As Sally Banes – key historian of the postmodern dance scene in New York – describes, Forti began choreographing with ‘an advantage: her body was not ingrained with any one technique or theory of dance’ (Banes, p. 22). This statement in itself reflects something of what is at stake for Noland in her approach to gesture – that gesture ‘shapes a body that can perform – reform – that gesture in turn’ (Noland, p. 212). The basis of Halprin’s practice was to use improvisation as a means to ‘set loose all conceivable movements, gestures, and combinations of anatomical relationships, ignoring connotation and bypassing habit and preference’ (Banes, p. 22) and this, along with an eschewal of trained modes of dance expression, led to Forti’s commitment to working with various forms of

¹ A brief rehearsal clip of this performance can be viewed here: <http://vimeo.com/49128454> at 4’08”

everyday movement, including developing an interest in children's games and the movement of animals. Banes characterises Forti's mature style as 'raw, comfortable movement, functional and unpretentious, devoid of elaboration through unnecessary gestures' (p. 29). In the mid 1980s, Forti started speaking whilst moving 'with words and meaning springing from a common source' (Forti, p. 57). In a recent interview with Patrick Steffen in the journal *Contact Quarterly* Steffen defines this practice – which Forti calls 'Logomotion' – as an 'improvisational dance narrative form in which movement and language weave together to explore thoughts and feelings about the world' (Steffen interview). Interestingly Forti's textual reference point here is narrative, rather than poetry, although her poetics here might well be applicable to poetry:

I feel part of what I have to offer is a connection between what I feel in my body and how I work with my rational mind, with language syntax and body syntax, because the body has a certain syntax, a certain bone structure, so it has to move in a certain way. (Steffen interview)

In a simple and theoretically unsophisticated way, Forti's conjunction of the syntaxes of both body and language is suggestive of Noland's posited rapprochement between a phenomenological view of the world and a post-structuralist one. Forti's improvisations do not entirely find their material on the spot, but she conducts twenty-minute continuous writing exercises a few hours before a performance in order to generate an outline. During the *40 Dancers* event, she actually read out these precursor texts at the end of her performances – a generous act of process-showing. She has also used newspapers in the performance space as physical props and textual stimuli for improvisation. If material is at least partially selected in advance of a performance however, the improvisatory dynamic is crucial to its unfolding:

When I am moving the telling of some material, I am as affected by my own movement as by the subject. There is a feedback and a responsiveness that is set up in my dancing body, in my dancing mind. I still have all the concerns of space, of timing, of movement interest. There are moments when I purely get lost in the movement. In the sound and rhythm of the words. I often feel like the movement is like paint and the words like pencil, or vice-versa, together on a canvas. They can contrast or follow one another, with a time lag or contrast of perspective, a detail against a broad indication. The references turn back around one another building a whole quite spontaneously. (Forti, p. 59)

This complex statement of poetics suggests the permutations of the double pattern of gesture described by Noland – one that reforms as it forms – as well as the importance of the kinesthetic properties of language both for this dynamic but also for introducing a productive tension into the performance of narrative, preventing gestures from simply miming or mimicking things described – although there are aspects of this in the performance.

Forti improvised a performance as part of a duet with Kirstie Simson in 2009 that beautifully illustrates her attitude to language as material and as gesture.² In this three-minute improvisation Forti invites us to experience words in the most physical way possible – as sounds, as objects that can be bent, eaten, baked into bread, crushed underfoot and, crucially, as the products of graphic gestures – ones that can even tear open the throat. Forti tells us 'you can walk and speak' and begins to mime writing with her mouth, making sounds as she

² The performance can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8HuM0RqXMY> between 2'40'' – 5'55''

does so, then marking out the shapes of ‘h’ and ‘o’ on the floor. She passionately and humorously enunciates these words, but also plays with reversing them so that ‘ho’ becomes ‘oh’, although ‘oh’ was already sonically present in her separate enunciation of it as the letter ‘o’. Later the letters are abstracted so that they become more like directions of attention to the left and to the right. Playing on the sameness and difference of verbal signs and their reversibility, Forti’s playful performance nevertheless belies an enquiry into language that a poststructuralist would recognise, whilst at the same time anchoring this encounter fully in the body by means of gesture. The dramatic effect is of a kind of play fight with language – Forti’s fist almost entering her mouth like an infant’s at one point – alongside quite violent images of tearing and crushing. Language is clearly present in the body and the body in language, as gestures of both sign and sound reverberate and clash.

Sally Silvers and Bruce Andrews have collaborated for many years – Andrews often working as Silvers’ musical director for her choreographic practice. Their co-authored poetics text ‘Movement/Writing//Writing/Movement’ offers a series of four movement scores entitled ‘TORSO SLING’ ‘HANDS RUN’ ‘PERCUSSIVE JUMPS’ and ‘GYNECOLOGY’. Three voices are clearly distinguishable in the text – one narrates movement instructions, one offers lines of poetry in Andrews’ typical style and another voice in parentheses offers a commentary. Here’s an example passage from towards the opening of the piece:

1st movement, TORSO SLING. *Parallel interest in concealment.* The piece begins by standing off to the side of the performance space but still visible, back to the audience. (Normal focus = norms, convention, stiff centrality.) (Peripheral vision = off to side.) (Hidden point, or origin – or else, material is constructed right before our eyes, not just referred to.) *Bulletoid. Some process detoxified inconsequentially decisive putty.* Fling the entire body out into the space using only the momentum that can be initiated from the torso. (Capture attention by pushing forward only certain aspects of language: parts of speech, of syntactical constructions, deletions.) (Andrews, p. 14)

What seems to be being worked out – and this is clear from interviews conducted with the two artists, including my own – is a shared poetics based on finding gestures in both movement and language which fight against habitual and received modes of expression. ‘TORSO SLING’ proposes that the mover enters the space ‘using only the momentum that can be initiated from the torso’: an unorthodox approach which resists the ‘expected mode i.e. legs’. Lines of poetry in italics are strewn across this paragraph seemingly as random interruption: ‘*Some process detoxified inconsequentially decisive putty*’ although they in turn become readable as relevant to the enquiry proposed – that standard movement practices are here being ‘detoxified’ in order to make way for something more soft and fluid like putty, if paradoxically – and inconsequentially – decisive putty! The commentary here is very clear on how these movement gestures have their equivalent in linguistic gestures: ‘capture attention by pushing forward only certain aspects of language [...] certain parts of speech are typical motivators, clues to settled context, creates a stiffness’ (p. 14). This line of enquiry is pursued throughout each passage. ‘GYNECOLOGY’ involves the mover lying on her back and spreading her legs wide, eventually turning towards the audience. Referring to the mover’s genitalia as ‘fleshy parts’, the commentary asks:

What is the fleshy part of the language, so that being grounded on it would prevent overuse of the usual central axis – fleshy verbs, spine...subjectified...nouns? (p. 16)

The intention is to relieve the performer of the

insistent centralizing strain of nouns, conventional selfhood. [...] Not being ‘upright’, writing can afford to be more abrupt. (p. 16)

This provocative work closely knits movement gestures and writing gestures together as both capable of disrupting the conventional modes of systematic dance and literary codes – finding equivalents in physical movement for the kinds of things that can be achieved in language and vice-versa. The politics of this are clearly rooted in the early phase of Language Poetry poetics – in which Andrews was a key player – which were very much a response to a poststructuralist view of the constitutive and constituting nature of textuality and the radical potential for disruption of conventional codes in order to expose and generate a wider (and wilder) understanding of the complex ambiguities of lived experience. The brief introduction to ‘Movement/Writing//Writing/Movement’ glosses this concern ‘for the production of meaning (and therefore, the constitution of the social body)’ (p. 14). The body is still seen here as more fundamentally textualised than Noland’s later argument would admit, but similar tensions seem to be at stake. If Silvers and Andrews offer a more language-biased take on the body-language relationship than Forti does, it does seem perhaps more compatible with Mac Low’s *The Pronouns*, although Mac Low’s text offers a more abstracted, de-socialised sequence of actions than Andrews’ restless fractured anti-sloganeering non-sequiturs.

As Sally Silvers put it when I interviewed her and Andrews in New York in September 2012:

SS: I guess it’s the avoidance of over-familiar dance moves that seemed to appear and reappear. The point of them seems to be a kind of transparency, instead of something that you can look at fresh. You’re not supposed to look at the movement, but at how well it’s being performed or how virtuosic it is. It’s leading you to some other meaning beyond the movement. This transparency, in other words, these idiomatic movements that are used over and over again from ballet, or modern dance [...] I feel my movement is more involved with the social condition of the body. (Thurston interview)

I want to reflect on a performance that Silvers and Andrews gave at Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural Center in New York in 2009 to illustrate this poetics in action.³ What’s crucial to note here is how Silvers’ movement plays between its own unfolding logic, its rhythmic responses to Andrews’ reading and its responses to Andrews’ text as mimetic gesture. For the larger part Silvers is responding to the overall tone and pace of Andrews’ performance whilst retaining the integrity of her own movement style of rapid shifts between suggestive gestures. A clear example of where the rhythm of each performer precisely coincides in a more observable fashion occurs towards the end when Andrews reads the letters ‘E. A. B. Y.’ and Silvers alters the position of her hands on her body in time with the enunciation (2’06”). We are not invited to link every movement to the text, but certain mimetic moments stand out. For instance, when Andrews reads the line: ‘if you think it, you may as well do it’, in the pause between phrases, Silvers raises a hand as if in thought, and then proceeds to move forward in a determined manner as if acting upon that thought (0’30”). Shortly afterwards when Andrews reads the phrase ‘foxy vertebrae’, Silvers undulates her spine for several seconds (0’44” – 0’53”) – allowing this phrase to echo, whilst subsequent phrases roll by.

³ An extract of the performance can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTHavzQ4QjE>

Towards the end Andrews's phrase 'mistress equals slave' is followed by Silvers moving backwards whilst holding an empty space to her side – as if positing another presence beside her – perhaps an effaced slave or mistress.

We might conclude therefore that Silvers and Andrews are aiming at an equivalency and entanglement of their gestures, and this is partly achieved by the compatibility of their composing processes. Andrews writes by assembling thousands of tiny pieces of paper on which he has written small groups of words collected from many different contexts. He works like this as a way of resisting literary language and preserving the social traces in the language that he uses. In the Clemente Soto Vález performance, there is a clear preponderance of material dealing with issues of sex, gender and power. Silvers similarly builds material by recording herself improvising in her studio and then selecting movements from video, but her vocabulary, like Simone Forti's, is drawn from the whole gamut of everyday movements that we make – perhaps best illustrated by the 'if you think it' gesture. Both use a process they call respectively 'live-editing' or 'live-composition' in performance where they then select from these materials in response to the developing improvisation. Silvers and Andrews clearly share a commitment to a discontinuous, disruptive mode of development, rather than seeking a more resolved argument or narrative continuity like Forti or to a lesser extent, Mac Low. Perhaps their most distinctive contribution to this area of activity is how, in dramatising the embodied nature of language and the linguistic nature of the body, they occupy an indeterminate zone between the two, resisting the habitual modes of both body and language as they unfold unresolved gestures of a constantly changing social vision.

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