

VITAL GESTURES – SIGNS IN MOTION: a dialogue between Sarie Mairs Slee and Scott Thurston

This creative conversation involves a dialogue between poet Scott Thurston and Sarie Mairs Slee, a choreographer and physical performer. Both artist/academics are based at the University of Salford in Manchester, England and work within a School of Arts and Media that champions and supports interdisciplinary and collaborative work. Their collaboration began in 2013, exploring the interplay between poetry and movement and seeking to develop practices that involve them both as 'writer/movers' in and between their disciplines. In 2018, they embarked on a new project – Vital Signs: Movement, Poetry and the Writing Body – which involved the creation of three new performance works (including *Wrestling Truth*), a poetry publication and a festival of dance and movement in September 2018. The concept of gesture holds a rich resonance for their collaborative work and this essay captures conversation about their current explorations, the longer-term drivers for their collaboration and the role of gesture therein.

Sarie Mairs Slee [SMS]: Scott, much of our collaboration grew from your early experiences between your work in poetry and different movement practices. What brought you into this collaboration?

Scott Thurston [ST]: I had been writing poetry since 1987, developing a profile within the innovative and experimental scene of contemporary UK poetry. But in 2004, I started to dance in Five Rhythms, a therapeutic movement improvisation practice created by Gabrielle Roth (1989, 1997, 2004). Straightaway, I observed an influence on the subjects and forms of my poetic practice, which led to further explorations of Contact Improvisation (Paxton 1972), Authentic Movement (e.g. Whitehouse 1956), Movement Medicine (Darling Khan 2009), Qi Gong and Alexander Technique. I started to feel the potential between these practices and the need to work with a dancer to explore these possibilities together. What brought you into this work?

SMS: My early training as a dancer was situated in American modern/postmodern dance, my professional life has been more grounded in European forms, including dance theatre and theatre laboratory settings. My first professional position was with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and work between movement and spoken text was a mainstay in that company's practices. After emigrating to the UK in 2003, I got more deeply involved in physical performance practices building on the work of Polish theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski and, for the last decade, interdisciplinary 'lab' work has been the richest vein of my creative exploration as an artist/academic.

When thinking about our work, I think that gesture has a very interesting role to play, especially when drawing on some of Carrie Noland's *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (2009).

ST: When we speak about movement and gesture, do you see or feel a distinction between the concepts of 'gesture' and 'movement'?

SMS: Yes, absolutely! Movement speaks to a state of physical activeness, but applies just as much to a swaying tree as to a marathon runner. Gesture carries something grounded in choice and intention; Noland asserts this term to speak to "organized forms of kinesis through which subjects navigate and alter their worlds" (2009). I find myself often coming back to this definition because I love the impact of that last part of the phrase: 'alter their worlds'. Gesture is choice that matters, that wraps around intention to make an impact. If taken in relation to creative action, gesture isn't just about the shape you make, but a choice grounded in your wider identity as a human being, as well as a dancer, writer, sculptor, basket weaver, fire eater, etc. How would you describe some of the consequences of gesture for understanding the relation between movement and writing?

ST: For me, the strongest impact emerges from the sense of the dialectical relationship between body and mind. Once I started working in Five Rhythms, it not only had an impact on the way that I wrote, but also led to a number of poems informed by this practice. In 2011 I started to research other artists' practices combining poetry and movement beginning with the Judson Dance Theater (1962-66). Key reference points were Jackson Mac Low's poems for dancers, the text/movement improvisations of Simone Forti, the work of dancer Kenneth King and dancer Sally Silvers' collaborations with poet Bruce Andrews.

When I started trying to think my way through all these practices, it was Noland's work on gesture that seemed most ready to hand to describe the 'double pattern' that fascinates me about this work – where the syntax of the body and the syntax of language start to counterpoint each other. Noland's dialectical reading of gesture is an attempt at 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' (Noland and Ness 2008, p. xiv). That's what I wanted – and still want – for my own work.

SMS: I think something definitely shifts when you watch physical performance as an audience member/ mover. It reminds me of the fascinating work our colleague Dee Reynolds has done on the experiences of watching dance (Reynolds et al, 2012). Individual audience members may notice bodies in specific moments of movement, work to interpret or read the performance content for meaning, or admire or pass judgement upon the dancers' skills. But as you watch dance as a mover, there is a kinaesthetic empathy that makes this act of observation internally active; you feel yourself wanting to join in or imagining choreographic alternatives to moments that 'don't quite work'. Watching dance becomes a physical experience. I was particularly drawn to this quote that you brought to the table:

In accessing these layers of sensation through movement, we [...] become peculiarly sensitive to the constructed nature of our acts; we become estranged momentarily from the practice in which we are engaged and recognize the presence of not only sensation but also cultural conditioning as it has been inscribed on our muscles and bones (Noland 2009, 212).

This dual awareness of the 'construction' and 'estrangement' resonates for me, especially in my experiences as an emerging mover/writer. I feel the interplay between what my body 'knows' as a choreographer and how I think movement will read to an audience, but working with writing as a physical and creative act throws me back into an active sensation of 'not knowing'. The experiences are both familiar and strange and, while I draw hard from my creative agency in dance and physical theatre practices, it may not be sufficient to find my way through these new sensations and creative choices.

ST: This concept of estrangement is an interesting one. There is a long aesthetic tradition which seeks and validates estrangement as an artistic function: John Keats's concept of negative capability, Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization or making strange), or Berthold Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*. I think that working across disciplinary boundaries is a perfect way of renewing and refreshing this alienation making it an enabling way of being present in beginner's mind. Although I found it difficult to begin with, and still do, there's also something quite delicious about being released from one's professional knowledge and just having to rely on instinct and being in the moment.

SMS: I love your optimistic slant on this; 'renewing' and 'refreshing' sound like such positive experiences! And in some sense, I completely agree. Our work has been at times so exciting and ambitious, driven by this common desire to shift co-composition away from defined performance products of 'the poetry reading' or 'the dance performance'. There have been moments that really felt like we'd struck on some new transdisciplinary territories working across movement and writing.

ST: In our most recent project, I think this is strongest in some of the solos and duets which hover in relation to verbal meaning. It is fair to say that we've resisted a post-modern deferral of responsibility for meaning to the spectator and instead sought embodied ways of articulating certain kinds of problems, for example, how to stand one's own ground in the face of terrible social challenges and the polarisation of political debate. When it's really working for me it's as if the language becomes a way to examine the meaning of the movement whilst at the same time the movement sheds light on and draws out the meaning of the language. There's not just one version of that relationship either, but it's a kind of constant testing of the material – how does this word inform this movement, this movement inform this word? Like that first solo of mine in *Wrestling Truth* when you recite our poem whilst I move; we don't intend that the words land in the exact same place each time, so it remains always rich with the potential for discovering new meanings.

SMS: I am glad you brought this into play. We've drawn from multi-disciplinary/collaborative practices of American postmodern dance, but recognised potential problems around leaving the 'meaning-making' to audiences. I mean, this is the usual role of the audience, but there are implicit norms, values and aesthetics built into spectatorship of either contemporary poetry readings or contemporary dance performance. Both poetry and dance work with the abstract and the symbolic; there is a danger that our compounded abstractions will simply not offer enough to an audience to do anything but witness what we are doing and hope for the best. If we are honest, it is easy for notions of meaning to slip by, for people to just 'not get it'. I think that is why the role of dramaturgy (and our wonderful dramaturg Kate Adams) had such a crucial role to play in *Wrestling Truth*: it draws on creative modes implicit in European dance theatre and its embedded focus on the human experience and our lived realities (Preston-Dunlop et al 2010).

ST: I think there is something important in the risks involved in our work. Time and time again, we have found ourselves reflecting about our respective positions in relation to each other's discipline: the uncertainty, fear and also optimism as we tried to grapple with composing in each other's idiom. But it leaves its marks in tangible ways; I recognise myself as a more flexible, embodied and improvisatory writer and performer with a broader range – bolder, more experimental, more confident. This grows from the work in movement, but also in the risk-taking necessary to develop a creative practice in my own movement repertoire and understanding of gesture.

SMS: When you talked about 'renewing' and 'refreshing' earlier, I found the phrase 'heart in mouth' bubbling up in response. As I said before, deep and speculative experimentation is something I seek in my creative work, and our collaboration certainly offers this in spades. Noland asserts that "performing gestures can generate sensations that are not-yet-marked, not-yet-meaningful. These sensations exact change; they may be productive of new movements, new meanings" (2009, 17). They may produce new movements and meanings, but also risk producing confusing, clunky and disjointed movements and meanings that signify nothing.

When we began, you were already focused on the interplay between poetry and movement, but it was the desire to open a new vein of creative exploration that drew me into this. It does give us different positions in our collaboration; for you, the questions are very 'first person' where I am more interested in the wider questions about co-composition where the human/body is central. It's like climbing a rock face together. We are dependent on each other and continually help each other to find new hand-holds on the ascent to work in our respective 'new forms'. But I think there is something especially generative in the choice to reach past the symbolic/abstract and look instead to the personal which is actually the ground of our connection: our human connection in power, struggle, intimacy, etc. within this risky and exhilarating work together.

ST: That's beautifully put! Our differences are so enabling because we have to reach across that gap, out of what is more normal, comfortable, familiar. I think my very first impulse as a poet was to make 'new meanings' – I think that is precisely the job of the artist – but growing up in the British avant-garde sensitised me to the risks of that approach. Perhaps gesture is where that happens in our work, as the space that links writing and movement. Maybe a collaborative and interdisciplinary practice is the only way to pose the question of gesture and its potential for cultural practice in creating a gestural repertoire, a movement language, a body of thought?

SMS: Perhaps not the only way, but definitely a way that brings many elements to the table across poetic writing, movement composition, interdisciplinary questioning, agency/risk as both creatives and people, and developing processes that challenge and enable.

ST: Maybe the question is how gesture can provide a dynamic way of exploring non-dualistic forms of expression that refuse to let ideas remain only in the abstract, and the body only mute, but which also allows them to remain conjectural, contested and open-ended. Moving as critical thinking.

SMS: And writing as critical thinking, as well. If we open writing and speaking to be fully embodied, creative acts, then the discussion of gesture has as strong a role to play as with fuller physical movement.

WORKS CITED

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