

On gesture, or of the blissful promise

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Then at one point
I did not need to translate the notes;
they went directly to my hands.
— Francesca Woodman

Often I believe I'm working toward a result,
But always, once I reach the result,
I realize all pleasure was in the planning
and executing the path to that result.
It comforts me that endings are thus formally unappealing to me –
That more than beginning or ending, I enjoy continuing.
— Sarah Manguso

Gesture is one of the obsessions of modernity. For the entire period and up to at least the mid-twenty-first century, the methods of studying and observing gesture, as well as the uses of the results of such researches are intertwined with some of the major and crucial problems that inspire arts and sciences. One of them is the fascination for the archive. This has inspired the idea of collecting movements in a sort of catalogue, sometimes organised rather scientifically, other times comprising curious movements and unfamiliar motions, as in a kind of Wunderkammer. In continuation with this, and yet pushing the 'archive fever' further, the desire and need of compiling taxonomies that makes it possible to grasp phenomena in all their varieties in-

vested gesture as well. In this sense, the study of gesturality as an anthropological element – as in Mauss and Jousse[1] – has aimed at collecting all possible forms of human movement in the attempt to build a catalogue of a human being's principal means of knowledge and memory.

As dealt with by an increasing number of recent publications,[2] cinema entered this dynamic, in that it has actually served as an encyclopaedia of gestures, one able to respond to the sense of crystallising the fleeting reality of live action, as well as to identify gestural cultural specificities, to circulate and canonise them. More broadly, then, it is possible to see a driver for this in the epistemological desire to know and comprehend, which may possibly lead to a yearning of controlling and owning (knowledge or else). It is precisely to attend to such desire that the attitude toward the study of gesture has taken up the method of dissection, fragmentation, isolation, separation, and extraction:[3] scientific enquiries seeking for units of movements taken out of an organic, complex, and fluid motion; medical films seeking biological and human patterns; industrial films aiming at optimising the utilitarian and normative logic of profit first and of late capitalist hyper-productivity later on, all seem to share the intent to dissect for the sake of efficiency and rationality. Film, with its frames connected into a flow, has particularly lent itself to facilitate the purposes of fragmentation and extraction because these processes are part of its language and working mechanisms, only in reverse – 'cinema is aligned with a properly modern set of practices that, according to Foucault, capture, reproduce and administrate bodies', argues Janet Harbord[4] – because, I would suggest, these gestures of capturing by way of dissection are a sort of 'counter-editing'.

Contributions on the philosophy of technique, the relationships between the human and the mechanical, as well as on the epistemology of media machines offer a rich insight to navigate these processes.[5] Whilst giving an analytical account of these, the articles gathered in this special section propose an innovative view complementing (and actually reacting to and questioning) this established perspective, demonstrating that in the idea of gesture there is inherently more than the opportunity to use human, mechanical, or electronically and digitally mediated motion to solve problems, produce better and faster, reproduce classificatory norms, consume and represent oneself and the other quicker, more, over and over again, in countless versions, all entertaining or reassuring. There is in fact an alternative in the reconsideration of the ordered, scientific, optimising, utilitarian element; it can be found by looking at gesture not as a means to achieve something, but at something

in itself, in its nature, structure, and at the way it is deployed through ‘enduring and supporting’, which is what Giorgio Agamben suggests.[6] Among the many interesting elements that he notes, two main ideas – potentiality and mediality – represent the key points which will eventually be picked up and expanded in the essays collected in the section.

Vilém Flusser also draws on potentiality in his study of gestures, which he describes as the site for creative possibilities where symbolic meanings can be articulated and expressed.[7] In this view, gesture works as an interface aiming to elicit and create the conditions for a form to be shaped, channelled, unfolded, as well as to connect, to put in relation two instances that lack a bridge between them. Also, it is an event that translates attitude into a porous body, and tells of communication and expression, opening the possibility of plasticity to potentiality. Whilst cinema has approached a certain thought of plasticity in the attempt to explain its gestural potential as an epistemological tool,[8] the concept of shaping and moulding ideas via procedural thinking is something that goes beyond moving images and cuts across different media practices. I have already contended that the dissection and extraction of motion can very much be seen as a break in the sequence of subsequent frames following each other as in film roll. Conceptually then, advocating for an alternative to fragmentation and separation corresponds to the desire to look beyond film. To reflect this, this special section comprises essays focused on a range of different media, highlighting the interstitial nature of gesture. In what follows I introduce the essays collected in this section, summing up their main points and weaving them together into a narrative that, while building upon the key concepts exposed above, attempts to expand on them theoretically. The aim is to move suspension, endurance, potentiality, and so on across the interstitial plastic event that is gesture, and to ask what kind of promise it anticipates.



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Fig. 1: Francesca Woodman, then at one point (1976).

Janet Harbord's contribution looks at gesture in the area of impairment, aiming at a semiosis of body movements which are expected to work as symptoms of difference and abnormality. Noting the interesting parallel between psychiatry and cinema and arguing for their mutual and corresponding 'dual crafting'[9] at the beginning of the twentieth century, the focus of the article is on what the author terms 'gestural-enquiry-films' produced in the context of neurological clinics, and in particular on films centred on autism. Used to trace the trajectory of neurotypicality, autism also works as a driver impacting the definition of social inclusion and exclusion, cultural normalcy, prevalence, and conventionality. Studying the films shot by neurologists it becomes apparent how gesture is inscribed within a profoundly

normative framework that determines what is socially and culturally acceptable, what is 'normal', and what is not. Over time, and by the 1960s, the role of cinematic language and grammar, alongside the idea of what a film may promise, is connected to a certain expectation for entertainment that impacts on the medical reading and ultimately on how the diagnosis formulated on the basis of the study of medical films is typified. In this sense, then, Harbord's accurately informed reflection does not simply shade light on the area of encounter between autism and gesture via the cinematic image, but contributes to the broader study of gesturality, demonstrating how gesture is an inherently interstitial category. Temporally located in the threshold of past, present, and future, gesture also embodies and performs the synthesis of the tension between the culturally typical and the globally recognisable, between particular and general, specific and universal, alternative and prevalent. The scientific purpose and the fascination for gestures that lies behind the films mentioned in this article attend to the conceptual and temporal elements, in so far as recording the movements of the body – be it an ill body or that of the actor – implies a freezing in time that subverts the very ongoing, performative nature of gesture, and fixes it along the arrow of time, that is, between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Similarly, gesturality is the dimension emerging in between universal and culture-specific.[10] The opposition between these two poles was precisely what (early) cinema – invested in the expectation to be a universal language – aimed at overcoming, so gesture operates in the threshold of particularity and globality to find a way around linguistic difference. The risk is obviously to remove the differences at all.

'The question of how meaning can take place without *spoken* language', writes Harbord, 'is the paradoxical strength and limit of early cinema, for which the language *of the body* is a solution.' The solution she envisages distances itself from the approach embraced to create the majority of the medical films she gives an account of in the first part of the article, and draws instead the attention to a handful of cases where the use of film has inspired an alternative approach to the study of the autistic gesture, without embracing the fixed and rigid normativity characterising the institutional attempt to attend to the psychic disturb. In the works by Ferdinand Deligny, Jeffrey Paull, and Mike Hoolboom, film ceases to be employed for the sake of classification and of the recognition of patterns; the extraction of the rule on the basis of repeated regularities is abandoned in favour of a more open attitude which, personally, I find immensely more responsive to the conceptual nature of what gesture ultimately is: as the film reel rolls, the direction of the

film is *tentative* in Deligny, exploratory in Paull, open to the patient's responses in Hoolboom, and this seems to fit quite well with the idea that gesture defies causal explanations and is free of any finality, as in Flusser.[11]

The issue of the translatability of gestures and its effectiveness as a strategy for cultural mediation is tackled by Marco Dalla Gassa in his article. Drawing on the discourse on cinema's fascination and vocation to document and evoke distant places and cultures, the author proposes a thought-provoking reflection on the dancing body as a figure to study in the attempt to overcome language constraints. He does so, framing his argument in a wider discussion around universalism, retracing the utopic vision that inspired the myth of a global language and describing its intersection with the geopolitical events that impacted on and, in turn, were impacted by this ideal in the second half of the twentieth century. Post-colonial studies, a critical take on exoticism and, implicitly and subsequently, gender studies compose the theoretical framework of this reflection. The analysis of three sequences selected from a corpus of Western European and North American films from the 1950s and 1960s serves to argue how any effort of universalism operated from a Western perspective is, in his view, destined to fail. The essay boldly approaches what is depicted as nothing but the presumption of Western cinema to categorise, define, and basically norm Asian practices such as the Bharatanatyam dance (thematized in the selected sequences), which are flattened in their gestural and communicative potentiality, so as to align to Western canons and interpretations. Looking at the gestural relationship between the camera, characters, and filmmaker, the article finds its relevance in posing the important question of how to relate with gestures, bringing gendered and subaltern others into the equation.

If Harbord's take on autism provided a crucial perspective to revise 'a normopathically oriented body language', so Dalla Gassa's view on the colonised/oppressed 'other' offers an interesting provocation to reconsider the Asian female dancing body in a different frame – that of misappropriation – from the one purported by Western cinema as exemplified by the films discussed in the article. The author's interest and insistence on the instable nature of language and gesture, the richness of the prospects they open, and the short circuit represented by misappropriation show – I would suggest – how gestures can be seen as symbolic infrastructures of potential mediation. When the potentiality, here defined as 'a "promising" negative stage, in Lyotard's sense', is deprived of its richness and biopolitical power, difference becomes oppression, the mediation imposition, the 'other' reified, reduced to

an object, a resource to simply exploit, depicted as aggressive (as in the autistic body) or primitive (as in the colonised/female body) enough to justify the oppression in the conformist oppressor's conscience. The failure of such symbolic infrastructures of potential mediation tears out the human element characterising any cultural negotiation and encounter and transforms it into a non-human imposition of discipline, where the flowing irregularity of mediation and the promise of potentiality are forced into a mechanic, rigid mechanism programmed for a utilitarian efficiency.

Christa Blümlinger's essay explores the relationship between human body and machine, embracing a cinematic perspective, in the conviction that cinema can analytically unpack such relationships. She draws from an anthropology of techniques which connects the 'techniques of the body' to the broader context of culture and of the technical activities performed by the human body in ways which both Benjamin and Simondon have studied. To do so, the author uses Zoe Beloff's installation *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff* (2011) and reflects upon the moving image as a tool to exercise control on the human body, as well as upon movement per se, of which gesture is the basic unit. The artist's approach (and in line with it Blümlinger's) addresses the issues of work as the site where the relationship human body/machine emerges in its powerful potentiality. Here, gesture tends to be identified and isolated from the continuity where it is inserted via that 'counter-editing' move that separates discrete gestures instead of stitching them together. Separation speaks of an industrial logic where gesturality, as expressed in labour, is dissected to be rationalised for production purposes. Beloff's piece shows how (the body at) work needs to be framed as a technical activity which is not to be solely interpreted in light of an economic reading, but rather as part of culture. In this way the resulting depiction does not only sketch and question alienation as the outcome of an exclusively profit-driven model, but focuses on the way in which subjects and objects find a point of encounters on their – borrowing from Simondon – 'modes of existence'.^[12]

Overall, I believe one of the points that this essay makes apparent is that discussing gesture is very much a question of displaying the components of a dispositif, of a machine caught in the process, in the making, working. The processuality of gesture comes to the surface in work. Therefore, it is within the space of work that a resolution tying together the mode of existence of the human body and that of the machine can be devised: in other words, it is observing the 'gesture of making'^[13] that the isolation, fragmentation, and

extraction of gesture can be restituted to the creative flow it belongs to. Blümlinger's argument is that, within the space of work, cinema does not only participate in the alienation of the body filming it for utilitarian purposes, but offers the opportunity to recognise a human bliss, a magic quality in the relationship between body and technical objects. Personally, I find that, more broadly, the bliss of gesture resides in its potentiality and ongoingness – an act in the now which asks to be left flowing free, not isolated but joined with its before and after, not extracted and dissected but woven into becoming even when it is not certain what it will become. Far from proposing an ode to presentness, the point is conversely a call to read gesture as part of a duration composed of the motions and actions articulated, expressed and, sometimes, enduring over time – gesture is practiced duration.

It is precisely in light of duration and around this procedural thinking that the project *Drawing Light* by Nicole De Brabandere and Alanna Thain revolves. Their co-authored essay elaborates critically on the research creation workshop with the same name they conducted in February 2018 in Montreal. Pitched to the participants as an event to reflect on 'gesture's ability to activate an encounter between abstraction and animation', the workshop built a platform to think gestuality as the potential bridge allowing for established concepts such as cinema, screen, skin, actor, embodiment, body, and light to be questioned. I believe the relevance of this experiment lies (also) in the visionary freedom embraced by the organisers which enabled them to question ontologies and conceptually mobilise notions like the above-mentioned ones by eliciting their mutual encounter. Clearly, light with its changing quality, moving ability, and mutable materiality lends itself quite nicely to serve as a metaphor of this idea of becoming. Expanding on this experience, we could actually say that light is a good element to observe in order to grasp the inherent aporia that characterises the discourse on gesture: its ungraspability is in fact a mode to practice duration by enacting becoming. Furthermore, I wish to emphasise the performative dimension of De Brabandere and Thain's project as an essential element that needs to be considered when thinking of gestures: whilst being framed into a rich body of multidisciplinary theoretical contributions, the notion of gestuality naturally hints at practice.

Trying to translate concepts into practice, gesture in its unfolding shows that its mode of existence defies stasis, it is 'coming to be', it is a motion of emergence, of coming to the surface, where the crystallisation caught by film only translates temporarily into a form which is bound to escape and flee. In

a way, gesture is a performative trace of motion.[14] The authors do not suggest this connection but one of their final considerations on the experience – which reminds once again of the open-endedness of filming the ‘other’ and of the human bliss amidst the machinic non-human – seems to fit with it: ‘we account for not only particular movements, materials, forms, and techniques but how, [...] something interesting starts to take shape that is felt, that only becomes articulable after the fact, and that is always incomplete’. Like a trace, light gestures emerge and their pace makes them systematically unfinished. But after their taking shape and before their fleeing, their blissful consistency leaves a trace, is indeed a sign, crystallises a meaning, delivers a message, opens up some room for what Bachelard called the ‘intuition of the instant’.[15] As I have already tried to underscore, the suspension of the expectation to create a fully rounded artwork and the holding of analytical models directed to ordinally situate each act into a codified process seem to truly have favoured the creation of a free, associative, seemingly elementary piece that does not need a specific shape nor, possibly, an end; a project that lives of its own provisional nature and finds its inspirational freshness precisely in its being under construction. The same suggestion is also picked up in the following articles, which offer further reflections to study gesture, situating it in relation to a different environment: digital media and the contemporary postdigital networked culture.

Tina Kendall is very clear in describing how the sense of suspension is a key feature in the media objects she explores. Her article looks at specific short videos posted on the now dismantled platform Vine. These videos all use boredom hashtags and typically entail loping facial expressions as well as repeated gestures revealing the affective state or mood of simply being bored. The author argues how this seemingly irrelevant state is in fact very interesting to observe when put in relation with the biopolitical management of attention in late capitalism. What is activated is a process of ‘affective modulation whereby the mundane and boring is translated into a feeling of anticipation and entertainment’. To make this more efficient hashtags are introduced; they reproduce the same modern tendency to fragment and divide bodily gestures by classifying, categorising, and archiving them according to an assigned value corresponding to a profit that gets eventually extracted through our spread (and naturalised) contemporary media practices. I like to imagine Vine as the synthesis of an imaginary and improbable encounter between Marey, Muybridge, Ken Jacobs, and Eduardo Saverin – in that Vines really work as a digital, condensed, moving version of chronophotography,

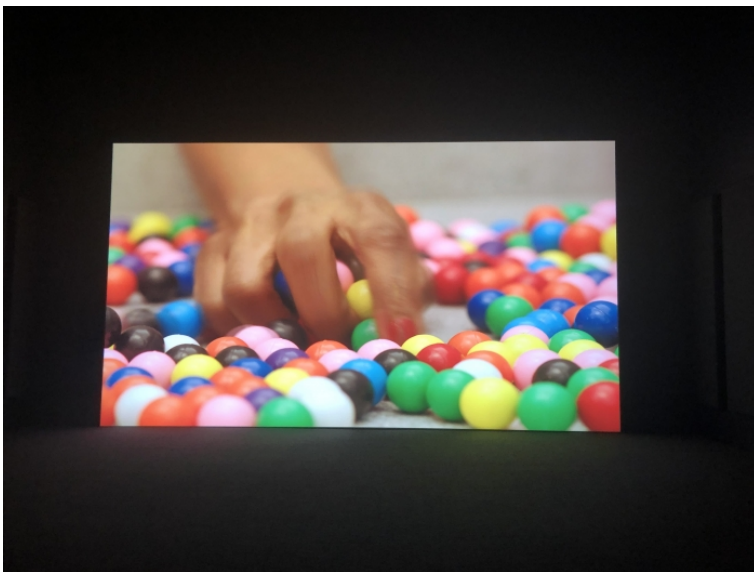
which shorten up a longer duration in a few seconds and turn the scientific effort of slowing down and visualising sequential motion and repetition into a refashioned, quicker, endless, sharable electronic loop. Whilst the majority of the boredom Vines align to this and ‘do-it-for-the-Vine’, Kendall suggests that a second category of videos still have an ethico-political potential, insofar as they ‘retain an inherent ambiguity that allows them to resist’ the platform’s affordances which are ultimately complicit with profit extraction. These videos differ from the previous because they focus on the embodied phenomenon of boredom in the time of its duration. By sticking to the unremarkable, banal, and elementary, they unveil the true shape of suspension and endurance that feature boredom as much as gesture.

Reminiscent of the delay that Laura Mulvey connects to the potentiality of gesture,[16] the undecidedness, unclarity, hesitation, the coming to shape of the gesture depicted in these Vines create a pocket of opacity and resistance that contrasts the exploitation of boredom for the sake of entertainment at all costs. The ‘state of incipience’ at which the gesture is caught highlights the possibility for duration, ongoingness, and becoming to take advantage of the suspension to simply be, without necessarily having an end, but rather serving as an immaterial storage of energies coming to appear transitorily, after a shape dissolves and before another takes shape to dissolve eventually too.

Moving through the same postdigital context of networked media culture as Kendall, Jennifer O’Meara’s work relates to Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response Instagram videos, indicated through the hashtag #ASMR. These typically show malleable materials and objects such as soap, slime, marshmallow, or paint as they are displayed in their surface, texture, substance, and operated by hands. The images generate a brain-tingling sensation, often synesthetic, that is studied in physiology and psychology. As a matter of fact, this research on ASMRs is mainly analytical and quantitative. O’Meara posits that hard and social sciences would benefit from a qualitative approach, too, possibly informed by media and film studies. Acknowledging the importance of the aural component and yet, here, looking primarily at the visual element, she retraces a number of gestures to be found in avant-garde cinema that, she argues, constitute interesting antecedents for ASMRs. Works such as *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), Brakhage’s hand-processed, hand-painted films, and Bute’s *Abstronic* (1952), which was produced by adapting an oscilloscope to capture the trace of manipulated electron beams, share with ASMR videos an interest

in synesthetic perception, an emphasis on the visual properties of the manipulated objects on their textural qualities, and a particular attention to the creator's hand. The gestures of the latter in particular connect the sphere of production and that of use/spectatorship – the creating hand on screen and that activating the touchscreen. As O'Meara points out, both are 'concerned with tactile forms of vision and pleasure of patterns, colours, and material textures rather than narrative'.

Probably a good synthesis merging avant-garde flavour and ASMRs is Mika Rottenberg's *Spaghetti Blockchain* (2019), recently on display at the New Museum in New York. In a sequence of the video the visitor is presented an imaginary ASMR production centre that offers a wide range of colourful sounding materials and objects manipulated, activated, and practiced by female hands. Pairing the small scale of the Instagram videos O'Meara writes on and the large-scale projection of Rottenberg's works really magnifies the key role that pleasure has in the frame of a reflection on gestuality. In this regard I would suggest that leaving room to what is properly cinematic/artistic and seemingly a diversion from a clinical, scientific objective in the study of ASMRs is in fact an opening towards gesture's plastic potential for pleasure. This should not necessarily be linked to the fetishised feminised hands featuring them (of which the essay gives due account) but rather lies in the plasticity of the gestures they display – gesture is not simply a storage of energy and potential resistance but of potential pleasure. Such plasticity is made apparent by the mixing, shaping, and moulding, however much the gesture performed by the diegetic hand and that performed by the user's hand feels such a different tactile sensation – the former of physical manipulation, the latter in fact adhering to haptic visuality – that underlines a 'perpetual deferral and discrepancy between immediacy and tangibility'. Such discrepancy seems to hint at a state of unsatisfaction, however I would contend it should be framed alongside suspension, ongoingness, and in-betweenness as the site where a bliss of pleasure may indeed sparkle.



Figs 2, 3: Mika Rottenberg, *Spaghetti Blockchain* (2019), New Museum, New York City, author's personal photo archive.

In different ways, both Kendall's and O'Meara's contributions make clear, amongst other things, that the gesture typical of contemporary networked culture requires to be thought as an incarnate experience. Moving along a

trajectory that proceeds from the affective state of boredom, going through the synesthetic corporeality elicited by the hand gesture, the article closing the section tackles a dimension of full embodiment. Darren Berkland's essay explores the selfie, proposing to think it as a gesture. As such, he claims, the selfie is a process, screenic, embodied, and therefore complex. To expand on this, Vivian Sobchack's 'screen-sphere' is employed and extended so as to take into account the multiple gestures that in fact articulate the selfie – not just a picture taken but a whole set of symbolic movements and operations, including the preparation, shooting, editing, sharing, and the subsequent image life online. Berkland terms topology the way in which entangled and mutually implicating gestures construct the space where the selfie dwells. This idea, borrowed from Brian Massumi but unpacked with specific reference to this reflection, is useful to describe our postdigital culture where relevant phenomena for a contemporary and interdisciplinary study of gesture (i.e. the selfie, as well as ASMRs and Vine videos) occur.[17] Contextually, because gesture is here a way to engage with screens, it also highlights how the affordances inscribed in screen media devices are intertwined with the subjects and their practices, to the extent that the 'mediaspace'[18] becomes indistinguishable from their lifeworld. The reference to the film *8th Grade* (2018) that runs throughout the entire essay as a sort of fil rouge efficaciously exemplifies this. It is in following the gestures of the protagonist as she grasps her hand-held devices that Berkland demonstrates how gestures are what allow one to 'commit to an intentional act of incarnate consciousness' belonging to a situated, phenomenological body. Transient and transitory by nature, and even more so when moving into the topological as depicted by Massumi, gesture is a configuration of movement and plasticity in continuous transformation. This sense of potential constant relaunch and rearrangement is further complicated by the role of the mirror in the gesture of the selfie: very often the selfie is taken in front of a mirror, and at the same time the phone screen becomes a digital mirror where one is not reflected but recorded and translated into an image that 'functions in a manner like a mirrored surface'. The gesture of the selfie seems then to arise in the suspension and displacement between the subject and her/his reflection. This is an interstitial situation where a mediated double, not dissimilar to the carbon copy created by Zoe Beloff and observed by Blümlinger, does not seem reconcilable, until the hand performs a grasping gesture – a prehension becoming comprehension – that unifies 'two discontinuous orders of perception'. Sitting in between gesture reunites, and in so doing it unfolds a potential of reconciliation.

Reading through the essays collected in this special section, I have attempted to outline a way of thinking contemporary gesture across media practices. Some contributions have provided the essential basis to contextualise and properly historicise the important research that has already been conducted on this topic, others have highlighted aspects that lent themselves to open up an alternative perspective on well-established concepts. The effort has been to articulate a narrative which could develop cumulatively, building up at each essay to attend to the complex nature of gesture.

It seems that as much as some of our media practices are rooted in a rather strict and dry dispositif perpetrating a machinic optimisation of production, profit, and value distribution, there might be a creative alternative, an unintelligible potentiality that subverts the patterns instead of creating new material to feed in them. It also seems that with the ideas of interstitiality, ongoingness, and continuous transformation without a specific finality, exposing ourselves to in-betweenness, accepting hesitation and coping with the uncertainty of mediation, practicing duration and enacting becoming, supporting the openness that allows potentiality to swing from plasticity to pleasure, learning the freedom of continuing and enduring instead of struggling to the end, we can perhaps create the most illuminated knowledge. Agamben opened his notes on gesture naming a crisis, and these features may also be interpreted as a sign of crisis. In fact, taking up the challenge of gesture means to trust in the process, to adopt procedural thinking, to experiment and leave room for a promise – be it one of resistance or reconciliation – because the true accomplishment is in the bliss of the promise.

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Notes

- [1] Mauss 1968; Jousse 1969.
- [2] Väliaho 2010; Chare & Watkins 2017; Blümlinger & Lavin 2018; Grespi 2019.
- [3] Väliaho 2014.
- [4] Harbord 2016, p. 77.
- [5] Simondon 2016; Väliaho 2014; Turquety 2019.
- [6] Agamben 2000.
- [7] Flusser 2014.
- [8] For an overview see Château 2004. More specific contributions are Faure 1995 and Francastel 1983.
- [9] Harbord's article in this issue. From here onwards and where not specified otherwise all citations without reference are taken from the articles in the section that I am discussing.
- [10] Grønstad & Gustafsson & Vågnes 2017.
- [11] Flusser 2014, p. 2.
- [12] Simondon 2016.
- [13] Flusser 2014, pp. 32-47.
- [14] The allusion to the concept of trace as something that remains and yet is never fully graspable refers to the philosophical category notably developed by Jacques Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), which is worth mentioning, but which I cannot expand upon here.
- [15] Bachelard 2013.
- [16] Mulvey 2017.
- [17] Berry & Dieter 2015; Evans 2019.
- [18] Couldry & McCarthy 2004.