

# SIOBHAN DAVIES DANCE

## ***Notes on Gesture —II*** **3 June – 31 July**

*'Each gesture is an event — one might even say a drama — in itself.'*  
Walter Benjamin

*Notes on Gesture — I, II, III* is a three part exhibition which unfolds throughout the year, leading towards a major new dance work by Siobhan Davies Dance. The exhibition considers the status of a gesture — whether physical or spoken — as something either made or performed. Indeed, while gestures might seem to be immediate, each has a history, a choreography, and these are considered through artists' performance, film, photography, and spoken word, as well as archival material from national and international collections.

The exhibitions draw upon the art historian Aby Warburg's idea of the recurrence of certain gestures in different times and different places — the 'afterlife of images' — and so certain works will be included in more than one of the exhibitions. These shifting, recurring displays will create new combinations throughout the year, with works made familiar and unfamiliar in turn.

Aby Warburg was born in Hamburg in 1866, the eldest son and heir of one of Europe's richest banking families. However, at the age of 12 the young Aby made a deal with his younger brother, Max, saying that he would forego his birthright if Max agreed to buy him every book for which he might wish. Max readily agreed, unaware of the extent of the private library his elder sibling would eventually create.

Warburg was an unconventional art historian — he was an unconventional figure in many ways — and published very little. He spent his time and vast financial resources, amassing the materials that would form the basis for his studies, most notably the transmission of classical iconography in later periods, especially the Renaissance. He gathered not just rare books — sometimes unique ledgers showing Florentine trade, in the hope of identifying certain patrons — but also photographic reproductions of paintings, friezes, carved panels and funerary urns, at a time when such images were unavailable elsewhere. These images were later sorted into categories and subcategories, the titles of which, on the subject of 'Gesture', can be found scattered across the windows at the rear of Siobhan Davies Studios, a constellation of acts, or instructions, or even descriptions of that which is occurring in the space beyond.

Towards the very end of his life — he died in 1929 — Warburg worked on what has become, perhaps, his most influential project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, named after the Greek goddess of memory. For this, he would take these photographs, often of artworks separated by thousands of years and thousands of miles, and pin them onto large, hessian-covered boards, rearranging them in order to draw out unexpected affinities between them in form and content, how a gesture carved upon a classical tomb might reappear, for example, in a Florentine painting. Photographs of some of these arrangements from his library in Hamburg, can be seen downstairs in the parlour.

This method — and sensibility — has been adopted in this exhibition and can be seen most notably on the first floor landing. Here, photographic reproductions from the photography collection of the Warburg Institute — now part of the University of London — have been selected and displayed upon a hessian-covered board. The images here are diverse, as are their makers, from the anonymous to the celebrated, such as Dürer and Michelangelo. However certain themes do emerge, namely the representation of the hand, and the gestures made by it, and the representation of certain forms of physical activity, whether work or

leisure. One of the images shows the three hand gestures used within an old Japanese drinking game called *mushi-ken*, a particular example of a type known as *sansukumi-ken*, or 'game of the three who are afraid of one another'. A version of the game — rock-paper-scissors — was imported into the West in the twentieth century.

Although Italian gestures are culturally specific, and we can see this in the small black-and-white photographs on display on the first floor. These are taken from Bruno Munari's 1963 book *Supplemento al dizionario italiano*, or *Supplement to the Italian Dictionary*. In this slim, elegant volume, Munari gathered hand gestures which were commonplace in Italy, and formed a parallel, gestural language to that spoken, written, or read. The book opens with some gestures collated by Canon Andrea de Jorio, which he published under the title *The Ancients' mimic through the Neapolitan gestures* (Naples, 1832). Munari then updates the project with a series of simple black-and-white images on the right-hand page, the left-hand page containing a 'definition' of the gesture in Italian, English, French, and German. The images on display here, from left to right, mean the following:

*Excellent!*: This gesture expresses approval and at the same time hearty satisfaction. It is typical of the good-natured and contented gourmet.

*Horns*: A protective gesture to ward off a curse or the evil eye. The index and little fingers of the hand jab downwards, as though to ban the evil into the earth.

*Artful*: The back of the thumb is drawn across the cheek from ear to mouth, to indicate that the person under discussion knows the ropes.

*Please*: It is an imploring gesture to obtain something. Which otherwise is unobtainable.

*Horns*: An age-old gesture used in connection with the foregoing. [In the book, the previous gesture relates to secret liaisons.] The hand forms the horns, but pointing upwards.

*It's nothing to do with me*: A gesture indicating abstention, whether friendly or otherwise. It means: 'None of my business', 'I wash my hands of it', or 'There's nothing I can do'.

*Threat*: The flat hand, palm downwards, makes a rapid, slashing movement across the throat, to suggest a blade.

*Wait a moment*: The hand is kept flat as to stop the person whom we are talking to.

*What a bore!*: The hand is tapped slowly and rhythmically against the chest to suggest a weight on the stomach. The gesture expresses boredom and weariness with something (or someone) who proves indigestible.

The gestures found within Darcy Lange's video nearby are not as clearly isolated, but they are expressive nonetheless. Lange was a sculptor and later filmmaker from New Zealand, who came to London to study at the Royal College of Art. In the early 1970s he began to make a series of documentary studies of people working in schools, mines and factories. His use of video rather than film — somewhat unusual during this period — meant that he was able to make long 'takes', filming people's actions and interactions in 'real time'. The films were not considered finished works of art in themselves, but rather research materials gathered, as an anthropologist might, as part of a larger project on social relations, in settings of education, and work, where the state or forms of power impinge upon the individual. In the long video on show here, *A Documentation of Bradford Working Life* (1974), Lange focusses on the bodily movements and gestures of some of Bradford's factory workers, closely observing how certain actions are repeated, a rhythmic choreography developed between the human body and a machine.

This relationship is brought up to date in Kari Altmann's ongoing video work *Multitouch I*, begun in 2012; and this latest version commissioned especially for this exhibition. Here, the dark and heavy physical environment to be found in Lange's video is replaced by a gleaming digital realm, with screens floating in an uncertain electronic space. The body's movements

are now a series of pinches, swipes, and flicks marking out our interactions with touchscreen technologies. These have become ubiquitous — young children can often be seen ‘swiping’ images in books, or flicking out finger and thumb in order to enlarge them — and yet such actions didn’t exist only a few years ago. Altmann’s video is testament to the fact that while some gestures do reoccur throughout the centuries — something central to Warburg’s research — some are made almost entirely anew.

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*Notes on Gesture* is conceived by Jeremy Millar, an artist based in London, and tutor on the Royal College of Art’s Critical Writing in Art and Design programme.

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

@SiobhanDavies @jeremy\_millar\_1 #NotesonGesture

#### **Credits:**

##### **PARLOUR**

Installation of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* in the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, Hamburg. (Warburg Cultural Library, Hamburg), c.1927–29

Photographic prints

Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London

##### **GROUND FLOOR LOBBY**

*Multitouch I* (2012-Ongoing) by Kari Altmann

Featuring soundtrack "Jemsheed" by Ayshay

Originally Commissioned in Powerpoint by Victoria Camblin for Art Dubai Global Art Forum 6 2012

Updated commissioned by Siobhan Davies Dance for *Notes on Gesture* 2016

##### **FIRST FLOOR LANDING**

Images from Warburg Institute Photographic Collection

Photographic prints on card

Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London

##### **FIRST FLOOR LONG WALL**

Images from *Supplemento al dizionario italiano* (1963) by Bruno Munari

Courtesy of Maurizio Corraini srl. Mantova

##### **FIRST FLOOR BALCONY WINDOW**

*A Documentation of Bradford Working Life*, UK, 1974 digitised video by Darcy Lange

Courtesy of Darcy Lange Archive, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand



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